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# Telling the Bees

A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface

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Submission for Doctor of Philosophy  
by Creative Writing

University of Sussex

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this collection of poems and critical preface are entirely my own work and that the material has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or part, to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

Margaret Ann Williams

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fellow D.Phil students for their encouragement, advice and continued participation in our inspirational and enlightening day schools. Their support and passionate engagement with poetry has added much to my understanding and development as a poet. I would especially like to thank Professor Peter Abbs for all his encouragement and wise guidance during the writing of the preface and collection of poems.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my family, whose patient understanding, encouragement and appreciation of my work has never waned during the long process of writing.

Several of the poems have been published in the following journals: *London Magazine*, *Agenda* and *Resurgence*.

The poem, 'The Beekeeper,' was selected for publication in the anthology, *Our Common Ground*, an anthology of poems celebrating farming and the countryside, and also in *The Price of Gold*, an anthology about the Honey Bee.

The poem, 'February,' was also published in *The Price of Gold*.

**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

**MARGARET ANN WILLIAMS**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Creative Writing**

**TELLING THE BEES**

**SUMMARY**

**Telling the Bees: A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface**

*Telling the Bees: A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface* is an anthology of fifty poems with an introductory preface.

The poems represent an individual journey in writing poetry. The preface examines closely the sustained process of writing the poems. It offers a phenomenological account of an apprenticeship as a developing poet, taking into account the many and varied sources of inspiration, as well as exploring the specific role of memory as a catalyst for the poetic imagination.

In the first chapter, divided into three parts, I examine the creative process in relation to the poems in the anthology, with a focus on the development of a poetic voice and personal sources of inspiration.

Chapters Two and Three consider in detail the specific influence of Seamus Heaney and Virginia Woolf, both of whom have deepened my understanding of the transformation of everyday experience into poetic language. Their respective critical and autobiographical writing provides an important insight into the mind of the writer, and a further illumination of the creative process. I do not attempt to make explicit links between their works, except loosely in the context of imagist theory and fictionalisation of memory.

In the final chapter, I reflect on what I have learnt during my long journey towards becoming a poet, drawing together the common threads that best illustrate the various complexities of writing poetry, including the craftsmanship it requires.

The collection of poems is divided into four sections with separate themes that sometimes overlap and engage with each other on different levels.

The first section, *Observations*, centres on Virginia Woolf and traces key events in her life based on her letters and diaries.

The second section, *Telling the Bees*, is an experiment in writing poetry with an autobiographical focus on family relationships, memories, loss and reconciliation.

The third section, *A Moon Calendar*, is a sequence of twelve poems that chart the changing nature of the seasons through the archaic names for each full moon, taken from different cultures. Some of these poems also have an autobiographical reference.

The final section, *An Indifferent Camera*, looks at our transitory relationships with the natural world, and concludes with a short series of poems inspired by photographs, paintings and artefacts.

## **Telling the Bees:**

### **A Collection of poems with a Critical Preface**

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## Chapter One

### The Making of a Poet

‘The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne’<sup>1</sup> Chaucer

#### [i] I Hear Voices

Finding a true voice, or a voice I can be true to, has been central to my development as a poet. Inevitably during a long sustained process spanning over six years I have struggled to make sense of my experience, to write the ‘good’ poem that is recognisably mine. In hindsight I was fortunate to begin many years earlier, by listening intently to the voices of others, as well as poets and writers who consciously or unconsciously attached themselves through meaningful word choices, tone, rhythm or familiarity to my own emerging appreciation of language. In his essay, ‘Feeling into Words,’ Seamus Heaney describes this necessary ‘tuning’:

How then do you find it? In practice you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer’s sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, ‘Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way. This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognise instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, that *in-fluence*.’<sup>2</sup>

Our early aural experiences make us alert to the ‘unconscious bedding’ as well as ‘the conscious savouring of words’ to which Heaney refers, particularly with reference to cadence and rhythm of verse. Songs, rhymes and poems learned in childhood are laid down in memory, even more so if the emotions are aroused by a shared experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, G., *Parlement of Foules*, 1381-1382, Line 1

<sup>2</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations, Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber 1980), p.44

In her memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past,' begun two years before her death, Virginia Woolf describes reading a poem as a child, shortly after her mother had died:

I had taken *The Golden Treasury* with me [to the park]. I opened it and began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling.<sup>3</sup>

Woolf remembered the emotional experience the single moment engendered so close in proximity to her loss, not the actual poem which had long been forgotten. It illustrates the long-term impact of encountering a text, often by chance and engaging with it positively as well as receptively. She felt 'that poetry was coming true' and 'It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets on the scent.'<sup>4</sup>

As she developed as a writer, Virginia Woolf continued to find reading a huge source of pleasure, comfort and inspiration as well as frustration at times.<sup>5</sup> She commented and wrote reviews of poems, novels and new works, all of which confirmed her desire to write fiction for an audience, in a large quantity of notebooks that eventually became essays. She moved fluently between enjoying different genres and poetry also had its place. In a letter to a friend in 1919, she quoted from 'Heaven-Haven' by Gerard Manley Hopkins;

I have desired to go  
Where springs not fail  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow.<sup>6</sup>

'Yes, I should like to have written that myself' she added.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Woolf, V., 'A Sketch of the Past,' *Moments of Being*, edited Jeanne Shulkind, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Harcourt 1985), p.93

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93

<sup>5</sup> Lee, H., *Virginia Woolf*, Chapter 23, Reading (London: Vintage 1997), p. 402-417

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 421, Poem quoted is by G. Manley Hopkins, 'Heaven-Haven'

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 421, Notes: Letter to Janet Case (Jan 1920, LII, 1112, p. 415)

A sense of voice begins to develop when poetry is read aloud and enjoyed for its cadence and rhythm. Seamus Heaney found an affinity with the musicality of poets such as Gerald Manley Hopkins. He credits other writers as early informal mentors, some for their Irish background and sense of rootedness in place. Patrick Kavanagh and John Montague are poets whose influence is clearly visible in some of Heaney's early poetry.<sup>8</sup> Later, Robert Frost gave Heaney an insight into a different, more sensitive style of writing whilst Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas provided a new strength of language, writing bold and exciting poetry that had resonance in its mutual appreciation of the natural world.

Poetry in particular is not written in isolation. A problem for the poet whether developing or experienced, is that of unconsciously imitating or even copying a line or phrase from another poem. T.S.Eliot commented, 'immature poets imitate, mature poets steal,'<sup>9</sup> condoning the practice whilst acknowledging that an experienced poet should know how to use all available material to good effect and act responsibly. Many poets look back at their earliest efforts in finding a voice with some embarrassment in the light of later experience. Heaney called his early verses 'trial pieces', 'little stiff inept designs in imitation of the master's fluent interlacing patterns, heavy-handed clues to the whole craft.'<sup>10</sup>

What distinctive voices did I hear on my journey? My earliest attempts at poems were heavily influenced by reading other poets. Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy were all strong voices I was drawn to, following earlier school experience of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Auden and Eliot. This was a standard traditional curriculum designed to provide breadth rather than depth of knowledge and real understanding of literature. I do remember my very positive response to Yeats, Auden and Eliot, which may have had more to do with the enthusiastic teaching than the fact that my 'ear' was becoming fine-tuned to poetry.

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<sup>8</sup> See Parker, M., *Seamus Heaney, The Making of the Poet* (London: Macmillan 1993), Ch. 2 'Affinities 1961-66' (pp.28-60) for a very interesting and informative account of the varied influences on Heaney's earliest poetry including references to Kavanagh and Montague.

<sup>9</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations*, ed. Peter Kemp (Oxford University Press: 1997), p. 168:5

<sup>10</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 45

There was a paucity of female poets in my education, apart from Christina Rossetti, but no shortage of powerful influences on my language appreciation. I read novels by Virginia Woolf, Charlotte and Emily Bronte and George Eliot at an impressionable age, reading with enthusiasm if not yet with total comprehension. Books were prized possessions, given as gifts and I soon had enough to open a small library complete with reviews for my friends. As a very young child I remember listening and reciting nonsense rhymes and riddles. My mother's literary Midlands family encouraged a love of music, books and reading as well as 'learning by heart' proverbs, sayings, songs, and poems for pleasure. From my father came the lilt and cadence of what remained of a strong Scottish accent, deliberately toned down through elocution lessons to 'fit in' with more southerly aspirations. These voices I still hear in my head and carry in my heart.

I do not believe I have ever actively searched for my own poetic voice. The process has been much more complex and a voice has evolved slowly over time, in parallel with learning practical aspects of the craftsmanship involved in writing poetry. The voice was always there but I had to discover how to use it, largely through attentive listening and reading as a writer and in experimenting with language to express what I wanted to say. I found that my ear became attuned to certain accents more readily than others and I was often drawn to a strong Northern poet like Carol Ann Duffy or more recently, John Burnside the Scottish poet, because of my roots within that culture. Heaney calls it 'verbal music;' the sounds of language from many rich sources during an impressionable childhood which were 'bedding the ear with a kind of linguistic hard-core that could be built on one day.'<sup>11</sup>

Virginia Woolf relied on the same kind of verbal music from her childhood, largely from her own literary family experiences but also from close observation, that she used to great effect later in her fiction, for example *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.45

<sup>12</sup> This aspect of Woolf's writing is explored further in Chapter 3. These novels, in particular, *To the Lighthouse*, contain references to aspects of her life and have specific autobiographical references.

In first writing poetry I stumbled towards my own voice, initially by writing through the mouthpiece of others in a narrative style, more in the manner of a novelist. I began by imagining characters and other lives, choosing to write a sequence of poems about the artist Rodin.<sup>13</sup> I enjoyed giving a voice to imaginary feelings and empathising with the significant ‘other’ in a relationship, the less famous partner or lover, exploring a personal point of view often not expressed publicly. This involved substantial research to be credible and required a large imaginative lens to create a personality. I also began to experiment with form and rhyme to express more effectively the conversational tone of some of the poems. I have always enjoyed telling stories and this was to become a central theme and focus for my poetry.

At the beginning of this study, I wrote a sequence of poems about Virginia Woolf inspired by reading her diary entries.<sup>14</sup> Imagining more than I knew, I wrote ‘Condolences’ (TTB: 73). In this poem, Leonard Woolf sits at her writing table re-reading her last letter:

Closing his eyes brings her to him.

*He is her...*

Wasted pages crumpled in his fist,  
wet ink, a draft as always,  
those long stained fingers.

He can see the pen, her wrist bent at the strap,  
time itself ticking.  
Her arm resting on the table he sits at now,  
lifting the page for the last time  
and turning it over.

I originally wrote this poem in the sonnet form in which it was published,<sup>15</sup> and recently revised it, reshaping the final line, ‘feeling the helplessness of love’, to the more pragmatic and masculine ending, ‘lifting the page for the last time/and turning it over.’ This revision I felt was a better representation of Leonard Woolf, but also

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<sup>13</sup> These poems are not included in the anthology, *Telling the Bees*.

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press 1969). In 1915, VW began to keep a regular diary and continued until a few days before her death in 1941. This volume was edited by Leonard Woolf, and contains almost every passage relating to her writing methods.

<sup>15</sup> *Agenda Magazine* (2003), Volume 39 No 4, p. 449. The issue commemorated the life of Editor William Cookson, and ‘Condolences’ was chosen to be the final poem in the anthology, aptly because of the subject matter.

indicative of my emerging critical awareness of the shape of a poem and my changed feeling over time towards the intense emotion expressed in this poem. The revision<sup>16</sup> interested me for several reasons. Firstly I questioned my motives for feeling that the poem was unsettled and incomplete and whether I should have changed it after publication. Was this due to my inexperience at this early stage? I was flattered that it was accepted immediately for publication which made me feel the poem was now sacrosanct and should not be changed. Now, I am aware that poets sometimes revise poems slightly between one publication and the next. Secondly I wanted to find out more about the changes in myself since the time of writing. I was becoming a confident writer and more self-critical, especially of form and the visual impact of the poem on the page.

Another poem from the same sequence, 'Clearance' (TTB: 74), was originally two stanzas that I shortened to make one poem. It was very much rooted in the personal experience of clearing effects following my mother's death. Anyone who has had to undertake this final act will recognise the emotion involved in sifting through a lifetime's possessions and how finally it is those tiny commonplace details, 'a thin loop of her escaped hair', that undo us:

Her dress, leaf-green and surprisingly fresh,  
hangs in spaces he wants his thoughts to go.

Somewhere ink-dark, small, incomparably safe.  
It isn't the largeness of death that occupies him,

but tiny reminders, accidental details that one day  
will snag his breath. Not the emerald glass beads

she held up to the light once to dazzle him, but  
a thin loop of her escaped hair caught in the clasp.

In my imagination Leonard Woolf is slowly coming to terms with his loss. 'Her dress, leaf-green and surprisingly fresh' refers to the spring time of year; 'somewhere ink-dark' is a direct reference to the Hogarth Press. The 'emerald glass beads' describe a favourite necklace of mine which glistened when I held it up to the light, and

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<sup>16</sup> This revision is discussed and analysed further in Chapter Three, 'A Matter of Being', p.43

indirectly to Woolf's preference for green ink that I referred to earlier in 'Condolences' (TTB:73) quoted here:

Again and again,  
he searches the familiar print  
for meaning. The green ink,  
smudged in places reminds him of weeds,  
the river's edge, this morning like no other.

'Clearance' illustrates the many and varied sources that a poet raids to find imagery. This poem contains an early example of internal near-rhyme, 'dress/fresh', that was unintentional as my craft was still immature. I gradually began to develop an 'ear' for the rhythm and cadence of poetry, experimenting with form and the shape of a poem on the page. In the title poem of this sequence, 'Observations' (TTB:71), I wanted to express through simple imagery something of the strange paradox between the last sentence of Woolf's diaries, which included a matter of fact observation, 'L. is doing the rhododendrons' <sup>17</sup> and her final walk across the fields to the river four days later:

### *Silence*

Disturbed by waterlogged steps  
and stones,  
stealing edges off each other  
in your pocket, each one chosen  
to balance your lightness,  
your weight.

### *Sinking*

Into yourself, imagined as this grey water.  
How else could you have felt?  
Last of all your eyes, scanning briefly  
the day it was going to be.  
The Downs cleansed in early light.  
Silver - that peculiar blue haze - green.

### *And then the dark.*

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<sup>17</sup> Woolf, V., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume V, 1936-1941 ed. Bell. A. O. (London: Hogarth Press 1984), Entry March 24<sup>th</sup> 1941, p. 359. Woolf continued to write similar 'matter of fact' comments in her diary in the days leading up to her death. However, the central thread of her recurring depression is also present. Earlier on Friday February 7<sup>th</sup>, she had noted, "Why was I depressed? I cannot remember....a week of broken water impends". (*A Writer's Diary*, p.364) Her last entry in this volume, selected by Leonard Woolf, was on Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup>, when she wrote about what she was going to cook for dinner: "Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down." p. 365



I revised this poem many times, changing words here and there but eventually left it alone. Rather in the manner of an over painted canvas, it became dull. Looking at it more objectively with the benefit of time and as a more experienced poet, I feel it is a good example of how to make a statement with clever imagery and an arrangement of words. I do not find anything of myself in it, no feeling, and my natural instinct is to revise it. However I have left it in the collection, since it shows by comparison how a poet develops critical awareness and sensitivity over time to their own work and their emerging voice.

In contrast, another early poem in the sequence, 'River Song' (TTB: 72), feels more genuine and real although it developed in a surprising direction. Whilst writing a river poem with Virginia Woolf as the subject, I simultaneously heard a tragic news story about a young girl who had slipped off a river bank into a swollen river, during a flood in the North of England.<sup>18</sup> She was never found and it was suggested she had been swept along the course of the river out to sea. During newsreel footage, rescuers stood on the river-bank holding a pale-blue blanket. I remember being very moved by these pictures and as I began to write, these strong visual images appeared in the poem. It became a 'hybrid' poem in a way and a double memorial:

It is easy to imagine  
a summer's day and you swimming  
upstream against the current.  
Strong brown arms grazing the steely water,  
a new voice singing in amazement  
of a journey to the sea.  
*You hadn't meant to travel quite so far.*

Becoming a dream,  
you are somewhere between here and there.  
In the pause between sound and silence  
when the orchestra has finished playing.  
No space to breathe if breath is all it takes,  
no waking, only sleep.  
*I sleep but my heart is awake.*

River, sing a different song.  
Make it a lullaby and long.

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<sup>18</sup> Source unknown

I now group this sequence of poems together in terms of my emergent voice which was still developing in conjunction with reading and studying poetry in depth. I began to be a more discerning critic and develop my 'listening ear'. I visited the Poetry Library in London<sup>19</sup> frequently during the course of this study, reading and listening to a wide variety of new as well as more established voices. I was also fortunate to take part in regular poetry day schools with a group of experienced and supportive poets<sup>20</sup> who encouraged me to listen and trust my own poetic voice as it developed.

Finding a voice takes time and patience. Almost two years after he began to experiment with writing in 1964, Seamus Heaney wrote 'Digging'<sup>21</sup> and thought his feelings or his *feel* had got into words for the first time. He was finding his poetic voice:

This was the first place where I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words: I felt that I had let down a shaft into real life. The facts and surfaces of the thing were true, but more important; the excitement that came from naming them gave a kind of insouciance and a kind of confidence.<sup>22</sup>

He describes how every human voice is unique in terms of sound patterns and structure, rather in the manner of a fingerprint. He suggests:

There is a connection between the core of a poet's speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice, between his original accent and his discovered style. I think that the discovery of a way of writing that is natural and adequate to your sensibility depends on the recovery of that essential quick...<sup>23</sup>

My poetic voice really started developing once I began to write more directly about my own experiences rather than writing indirectly about other lives in order to feel less exposed or vulnerable. I was aware that I had expressed stifled emotion, particularly connected to loss and grief, through the 'Observations' sequence of

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<sup>19</sup> Poetry Library, Royal Festival Hall, London

<sup>20</sup> Sussex University Poetry group day schools (see dedication)

<sup>21</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber 1969) p.13

<sup>22</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.41

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44

poems, yet I had not been brave enough at this stage to name it as my own. In reconsidering many of these early poems, I saw that I wrote confidently in the third person but rarely used 'I' to express my feelings, limiting self-consciously the subject matter I wanted to explore but did not feel comfortable to expose. The need to share personal experiences more openly has developed since my confidence as a poet has grown. My interest in confessional aspects of poetry steadily grew.

In 1998, Ted Hughes published *Birthday Letters*<sup>24</sup> as an unexpected and moving memoir of his turbulent relationship with Sylvia Plath. Three years earlier, in an interview, Hughes was asked his opinion about the label of 'confessional' poetry:

Maybe all poetry insofar as it moves us and connects with us, is a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately needs to communicate, to be delivered of. Perhaps it's the need to keep it hidden that makes it poetic - makes it poetry. The writer doesn't actually put it into words, so it leaks out obliquely, smuggled through analogies.<sup>25</sup>

Gradually over time I began to reveal more of myself in my poetry and it became a liberating experience. Many of the poems in the collection have loss, grief and resulting change as their central theme across a wide range of subject matter. Key personal experiences may have universality but grief is a powerful emotion to contain and express eloquently without sentimentality or cliché. Those poems I now consider to be most successful are deeply rooted in the context of my life, in memory and observation over time. They are in my own 'poetic space' in which I come to terms with restoring what has been lost and are written by a more experienced poet, without the inhibition of earlier censorship and indecision, which can limit the use of personal or sensitive material. By weaving life changing events into my poems, they have a different meaning and in the process of writing I have found new imaginative possibilities.

I began to write more explicitly about my parents and grandparents rather than smuggling feelings into poems about other people<sup>26</sup> and it was then that I realised my emerging voice was linked inextricably to the past as well as the present. It was a

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<sup>24</sup> Hughes, T., *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber 1998)

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, T., Interview, *The Art of Poetry*, No 71, *Paris Review* (1995)

<sup>26</sup> See poems in Section One, *Observations* (TTB:69-75)

voice that had always been present inside my head and was everything I had become, experienced, felt and remembered. From this point forward my poems felt more honest and I began to hear a new quality. In Heaney's words I had 'let down a shaft into real life'<sup>27</sup>

In my poem 'The Beekeeper' (TTB:77), I began by wanting to preserve a childhood memory of my maternal grandfather as a powerful force for good as well as a provident grower of delicious food in his garden and orchard. In my mind I always associated him with summer days, which were usually when we visited my grandparents in Herefordshire. The first stanza introduces him, un-named, as the beekeeper:

At weekends, he pretended to hang his own skin  
behind the kitchen door. *No use with bees,*  
he'd tease and disappear. For years we'd lose  
him then; on still summer days a shadow figure  
magnified on the whitewashed wall was all we knew.

I am aware that I do not name my grandfather although he *is* the beekeeper in the poem. As the poem develops, he gradually changes from 'a shadow figure' although 'magnified on the whitewashed wall', as he appeared, larger than life to the small child, to the more heroic figure in the orchard we followed without permission, 'to watch, open-mouthed as he calmed the fizzing bees to a gentle hum.' The final two stanzas describe obliquely his decline and final illness, contrasting the earlier image with his shrinking form on a much later visit. I remember vividly being taken to see him at home to say goodbye at the end of his final illness, and in particular, his hands like dry parchment holding mine. In the poem I wanted to replace this last memory with a more positive image:

Years later, visiting him, only a short walk from death,  
his ill-fitting paper-thin fingers holding mine,  
I remember how he had looked back then, as  
turning, he held out a gloved hand covered with bees  
for us to see something of the tenacity of love.

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<sup>27</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 41

Finally, a memory- image to replace the photograph that was never taken:

His hands danced in and out of shadow  
in the dappled light, under the trees, working  
an invisible alchemy of their own.

Poetry is like alchemy too. In writing this poem I felt that I was approaching a true voice that sounded distinctive. This poem and the positive way it was received <sup>28</sup> gave me confidence to write more openly about myself. As Heaney writes:

‘Finding a voice means you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them.’<sup>29</sup>

When I had finished writing ‘The Beekeeper’, I was pleased that I had managed to convey a central truth about my grandfather; that he was an important and loved figure in my early childhood. I also questioned whether he might have recognised himself in the poem?

He would probably have denied that he was a serious beekeeper and I considered whether that was the reason I subconsciously chose not to name him directly. My memory was linked to a more general feeling of well-being, associated with our visits and the fact that he *may* have shown us beehives. I certainly remember trying on an over-large hat and veil but was it his? The *true* memory at his bedside would have been a significant moment of heightened emotion and therefore much more memorable; one of Wordsworth’s ‘spots of time’ <sup>30</sup> or Virginia Woolf’s ‘moments of being;’ <sup>31</sup> ordinary but highly charged moments which leave a strong and lasting impression and are often the catalyst for a poem. I wanted to remember my grandfather and used the imagery associated with bee-keeping husbandry to shape the emotional content of the poem around this experience.

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<sup>28</sup> ‘The Beekeeper,’ was published in *Resurgence*, no 228 (January/February 2005) and subsequently in two anthologies (see Acknowledgements)

<sup>29</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.43

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, W., ‘*The Prelude*’, Book Eleventh, 1805, 257-389, also Book Twelfth, 1850 version, 208-335. An even earlier reference to ‘spots of time’ – ordinary moments of heightened experience that chart an emotional landscape, is found in a simpler version in ca. January 1799, appearing as 1799, 1, 288-374. Wordsworth devised this phrase early in his career and used it unchanged in later versions. For comparison see an annotated edition of both the 1805 and 1850 texts (as well as the 1798-99 two-part poem) in the Norton Critical Edition, edited by J. Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and S. Gill (Bibliography)

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter Three for reference to ‘moments of being and non-being’

The second section of poems, 'Telling the Bees' (TTB:76) reflects a strong autobiographical content with a focus on exploring relationships, memories and loss. I found writing these poems illuminating as they gave me permission to examine previously hidden emotions around some key events in my life. The title of my collection of poems, 'Telling the Bees', and the inspiration for the title poem arose from a chance reading of an old book of customs and my discovery of an ancient tradition still practised in Sussex within living memory:

Bees were notified of all births, marriages and deaths in a family, because people believed that unless this was done the bees would either die or fly away. This was called 'telling the bees'. The usual practise (*sic*) was for some member of the family to go down to the hives and knock on them three times with the back door key, and as they knocked, chant, '*The master is dead*' or '*the mistress is dead*', or whatever was appropriate.<sup>32</sup>

This led me to research other stories bound up with this traditional rural custom, not initially with a poem in mind but because I was interested in the theory that bees have long been viewed as moral creatures<sup>33</sup> and so much part of a family that their harmony would be equally disturbed by news, either good or bad. The hive might be covered by black material if a death had occurred, or a piece of wedding or christening cake left at the hive on a happier occasion. Sometimes bees were told of ordinary everyday events or worries; an echo from ancient times perhaps, that bees were the embodiments of human souls and could be trusted to hold a confidence.<sup>34</sup> This information I obviously internalised and remembered when I later came to write 'Telling the Bees', but it seemed an apt title and analogy for my own collection with the new confessional tone of some of the poems.

I returned to an image, an old faded monochrome photograph of an elderly lady bent over her hive talking to her bees. Similarly in a *Book of Folklore, Myths and Legends*,<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Candlin, L., *Tales of Old Sussex* (Newbury, Berkshire: Countryside Books, 1985), p. 67

<sup>33</sup> Notes: Bees were regarded as messengers of the gods; since ancient times, they were considered a symbol of the Soul and therefore immortal, divine beings, whose song was not of this earth. See Virgil's *Georgics* Book IV, Lines 24-566, for further reference to the ancient husbandry of bees.

<sup>34</sup> For further reference on the folk-lore of bees, see Preston, C., *Bee* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd) p. 113

<sup>35</sup> *Folk-Lore, Myths and Legends of Britain*, ed. Reader's Digest Association (London: Reader's Digest Association 1973), Illustration, p.70

an illustration revealed an earlier image. These separate yet linked images inspired ‘Telling the Bees’. This poem underwent several changes<sup>36</sup> before its finished form, reflecting how some poems evolve slowly from a variety of stimuli, including research around a subject, which prepares the mind to explore new possibilities of language and imagery. This in-depth focus on research has more in common with the way in which a novelist works, and dispels the myth that poetry is always more instantaneous, ‘of the moment’, in its creation. When on occasion, a poem does arrive almost fully-formed, the work has already subconsciously taken place but it is still a gift and often a surprise.

I began to write the poem ‘Telling the Bees’, deliberately as a kind of visual narrative, working backwards from the final line, ‘Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night’. I found this a fresh way of working which made me consider the content carefully, placing myself in the situation of the central unnamed character receiving the bad news ‘she would later whisper to the bees, to muffle their grief and smooth their angry voices.’

News travelled more slowly then; had its own momentum,  
a gathering storm as it passed through cities, towns, villages,

just as a single horseman might once have warned of danger,  
glancing over his shoulder; the growing urgency behind him

a disturbance in the air, a brooding cloud of unease, a swarm.

The middle section of this poem introduces the anonymous recipient of the news and includes a series of superstitions that I recalled from childhood. My mother possessed a wealth of similar folk-lore and knowledge<sup>37</sup> that must have entered my impressionable mind at a young age, a ‘kind of linguistic hard-core that could be built on some day.’<sup>38</sup> Was this my mother in the poem? Not consciously and I am unaware of any other similarity, but it serves to illustrate the various influences that are ever-present in our bank of memories and may be given new life in a poem:

She said she sensed something wrong when the clock stopped.  
Before that the dead pigeon on the roof was a clue, its feathers

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<sup>36</sup> Reference to revision of this poem – discussed in Chapter 4

<sup>37</sup> See also ‘Legacy,’ (TTB: 80).

<sup>38</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 45

sticking to the window-glass, each gust of wind finding more.  
 She began to look for signs herself, a heron blown off course,  
  
 the screech owl nearby. She greeted magpies like old friends,  
 saw endings not beginnings, imagined the plumb-line to loss,  
  
 the weight of his absence, long before language named it.

The poem ends with the reference to the title and the original idea of telling the bees:

What surprised her was the way the sun exploded from nowhere  
 and her mouth stayed open to catch it, stayed open to swallow  
  
 the words that were left unsaid; those she would later whisper  
 to the bees, to muffle their grief and smooth their angry voices.  
  
 Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night.

Originally, in an earlier draft I wrote about the woman 'leaning on a garden gate' prior to receiving the news. This was a direct reference to a gate I remembered from my childhood, at my grandparents' house deep in the countryside. When I leaned on it, it swung and looking up through the dense trees I was conscious of the bright sunlight in the gaps that became the 'exploding sun' in the poem. This poem was revised several times before I felt it was complete. In particular, the lines that describe the emotional pivot of the poem, 'imagined the plumb-line to loss/the weight of his absence, long before language named it,' underwent many revisions and made me more aware of the weight that every single word carries as well as the power of a strong image, 'plumb-line to loss' to express extreme emotion.

When the poem was finally finished, I decided that it *was* about me after all. My own loss of both parents within a short space of each other and irrational fear of losing other loved ones, not being able to protect against bad luck should it come, how bad 'news' is broken. Had I intentionally set out to write the poem with these themes in mind I do not believe it would have worked on the same level, but quite clearly I was ready to share something of my personal past. The original poem included the following lines, 'telling the bees was easy, the simplest part/after the swarm of news that broke her heart.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lines originally written as an introduction to the poem 'Telling the Bees' (TTB:76)



In contrast, the poem 'Cultural Heritage' (TTB: 82) from the section 'Telling the Bees', is an example of a deliberate attempt to write about my father, following a short visit to Glasgow, his birthplace and where he spent his childhood. This time I knew that I wanted to capture my feelings within the context of my limited knowledge of his early family life. I feel this is a very honest poem in which I recall an impression of my paternal grandmother and life within a tenement building. It was inspired by a visit to The Old Tenement House, a popular tourist attraction. Whilst there I imagined how life was, 'in row after row of grimy terraces, the children slept/between thin layers, packed in like apples for the winter.' My father ran away to sea aged fourteen, but I saw him in the gift-shop book illustrations and photographs, 'pinched, unholy ghosts of boys like you' and heard his original voice on the way home, 'I had given you up for lost, until the last bus out of town/coughed up a woman who might have been related' with 'an accent I half knew – broad – uncompromising – yours.'

I found this poem satisfying to write; waking up the spirit of my father had restored him to present consciousness and brought him nearer in a safe and manageable sense. Now with a more secure and confident poetic voice, I had found a catalyst for my imagination in linking the past with the present.

Now, as well as the story-telling aspect of my writing, another theme to emerge and explore was restoration; the means by which I could easily revisit the past and use my imagination to restore and rebuild what I found there. From the vantage-point of the present I found it easier to deal with the 'buried past' in a poem, where my imagination could repair, heal and make whole again. Some poems were not totally truthful in terms of factual content, as in 'The Beekeeper.' Was this what is commonly called 'poetic licence'? I became interested in aspects of truth and fiction in a poem, and how a balance is achieved between the two. How much honesty does a poem need to be a true reflection of a poet's voice?

There is an interesting example in Heaney's poem 'Seeing Things,' Part III<sup>40</sup> from the book of the same title, when he recounts an imagined incident involving his 'undrowned' father, whom he describes losing his balance and falling into a deep stream. It sounds real and true from what we already know of Heaney, yet he also begins the poem with, 'Once upon a time,' and ends with, 'happily ever after,' suggesting a 'tale'

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<sup>40</sup> Heaney, S., 'Seeing Things,' Part III, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber 1991) p.18

is being told. In reality the poem with its metaphorical imagery of the son seeing the father as if for the first time, ‘that afternoon I saw him face to face,’ in a compromised position, ‘scatter-eyed and daunted’ is a believable invention. Heaney’s imagination has created the perfect setting in which to express his changing feelings as a young man wanting independence, towards his father, the authority figure. The poems in *Seeing Things* were written in retrospect after his father’s death and as such it may then be considered more acceptable to reinvent memory or alter the truth of how things were, in the interest of capturing that all elusive emotion in a poem.

Certainly the voice of Heaney’s father comes across very strongly in these poems, and literally in the manner of conversations drawn from memory. Old expressions, sayings, even more movingly, hand-me-down snippets of talk filter through the poem, ‘Man and Boy’<sup>41</sup> for example. This is in contrast to what we know of Heaney’s father, as a man of few words, from his autobiographical accounts of childhood,<sup>42</sup> but are all the more poignant; *these* are important, *this* is remembered.

The voices inside our heads, remembered or imagined from childhood, have a new and singular energy when recalled, which may well be related to the intensity of the original experience of the sounds and experiences that have made us who we are, as well as our attachment to our key adults at an impressionable age. The transformation of personal memory and experience into art has provoked many questions and inevitable comparisons with psychoanalysis. This is not defining poetry as ‘therapy’ but recognises an affinity of process, of engaging with both inner and external experience, retrieval and reparation, as well as communication through the shared medium of language.

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<sup>41</sup> Heaney, S., *Ibid.* p.14

<sup>42</sup> O’Driscoll, D., *Stepping Stones, Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber 2008), ‘Bearings’ p.56

### [ii] Voices within

In his poem, 'Personal Helicon,' Seamus Heaney writes:

I rhyme  
to see myself, to set the darkness echoing <sup>43</sup>

This was the final poem in Heaney's first book of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*. He went on to revisit his rural Irish country childhood for memorable images and experiences that enabled him to establish his own poetic voice whilst illuminating the *darkness* for himself. In later essays,<sup>44</sup> he examines the external sources that had such an impact on his self-development. The narrative that is our lives, in particular the evocation of childhood or early experiences is a central theme in his poetry. It recurs even in his latest work, *Human Chain*<sup>45</sup> when it might be expected that he had exhausted the rich seam of childhood memory. With the hindsight now of age and experience, Heaney writes movingly of his relationship with his parents, some poems prompted by photographs, 'too late now alas, for the apt quotation.'<sup>46</sup> These later poems feel very different to the earlier autobiographical poems about Heaney's parents, for example 'Clearances'<sup>47</sup> which first inspired me to want to write about my own parents in a more intimate way.

There is consolation in poetry that remembers or recreates an experience that might otherwise have been lost. I wrote 'This May Morning,' (TTB: 85) in response to witnessing my mother's death. For some years after she died, I tried to write a poem that I felt would express the enormity but also the ordinariness of the end of her life. I found it impossible to move away from morbid sentimentality and eventually gave up after several attempts, although an idea remained. Ten years later, and more skilled as a poet, I felt ready to begin again and the poem came easily.

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<sup>43</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber 1966), p.57

<sup>44</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.17

<sup>45</sup> Heaney, S., *Human Chain* (London: Faber 2010)

<sup>46</sup> Heaney, S., 'Album', *Ibid.* p. 4

<sup>47</sup> Heaney, S., *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber 1987), p. 24-32

In *Writings on Writing*, May Sarton makes the comment that:

In the end what is most difficult becomes most easy, what was heaviest to lift becomes light as air and this happens of course when we are not thinking of ourselves at all, but have become instruments of our craft.<sup>48</sup>

All those years earlier, I had made notes that mentioned water as a recurrent theme, partly due to the muffled sounds my mother made in a semi-conscious state when she was trying to speak. The dream-like quality reminded me of being under-water and hearing sounds above, ‘as if inside a womb’ I wrote at the time. I may have subconsciously been thinking about our mother-daughter relationship. This was my first experience of witnessing a death; paradoxically it had many similarities to a birth. Hearing is the last sense to disappear, so I kept talking into the gathering silence of the room; this became the shared silence of the poem creating a meditative presence, the observer in the room. The poem uses the title to begin the first line:

This May Morning

My mother is mouthing an answer, but no sound comes  
to question the darkness she is slowly becoming.

Blossom outside the window settles,  
weightless as our words that cannot find her.

Silence is better, softly falling round our shoulders,  
dropping onto the covers like tears, petals, snow.

In the manner of a Japanese Haiku, I wanted to filter out everything in my rough drafts that distracted from the central theme. My response to this heightened emotional experience had to be controlled and this was at last possible with the distance from the event itself. Each couplet is self-contained to affect calm and finally a sense of closure:

Enough to know as lovers do, who share silence  
easily, that this moment will pass, become memory.

Instead, I stroke her hair; suddenly that small child  
bare-legged, climbing tall stairs while she waits patiently.

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<sup>48</sup> Sarton, M., *Writings on Writing* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd 1980), p. 22

I am in her place, wherever that is; soon she will know  
how infinitely the drifting blossom resembles snow.

I have written no other poems specifically about my mother since writing 'This May Morning'. In this poem, I felt I had contained all I had to say about the experience of her death, which I had buried inside me so many years earlier. I also felt a sense of closure and although I do not relate the poetry I write directly to a healing process, I am aware that this connection will be made by others. I prefer to use Heaney's description of 'heart-mystery'<sup>49</sup> to explain my mood of calm acceptance in this poem. I am inviting the reader to witness an external almost unbearable scene, whilst also thinking about me as the poet and my feelings, rather than identifying with me and my experience personally. This I feel lends an air of necessary detachment which ends with me letting both the reader and my mother go. The strength of love finally overcomes and outlasts the pain of separation and loss in this poem. In her memoir, Virginia Woolf reflected on exceptional 'life' experiences and decided that transforming the shocks of life into words was her way of dealing with a 'moment of being', and 'the strongest pleasure known to me.'<sup>50</sup>

Many writers like Woolf keep a diary to record their present lives and impressions as well as feelings. Does this make a difference to the quality of memory when referencing the past? How much is forgotten if not recorded somewhere other than the mind? Shared memories interest me, such as those in families. Each member of a family will interpret the past differently but each can add to the collective whole.

Virginia Woolf began keeping a regular diary in 1915 and continued making entries until a few days before her death in 1941. I have found *A Writer's Diary*,<sup>51</sup> edited by Leonard Woolf and published in 1953, to be an excellent source of material that takes extracts from the main body of her diaries, pertinent to her writing, and indirectly illuminates the creative process. Her diary entries provide a valuable insight into the mind and thought processes of the writer as she communicated with herself. This is in addition to the historical interest and detailed record of her prolific reading habit, views and opinions, thoughts on life and people that filled twenty-six volumes. Woolf noted,

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<sup>49</sup> Heaney, S., in conversation with Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* (London: Faber 2010), p.310

<sup>50</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p.72

<sup>51</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press 1969)

‘But what is to become of all these diaries, I asked myself yesterday. If I died, what would Leo make of them? He would be disinclined to burn them; he could not publish them. Well, he should make up a book from them, I think; and then burn the body.’<sup>52</sup>

Woolf frequently questioned their purpose:

I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously in fiction.<sup>53</sup>

After writing ‘This May Morning,’ I began to explore further personal avenues for autobiographical writing. At the same time I was reading around memory and recollection. The rich source of material available, including information about the biological basis for memory<sup>54</sup> suggests that it is the most complex memory, ‘explicit’ memory that is consciously recalled and can be expressed in pictures and words. Eric R. Kandel writes that some people and he identified Woolf as an example, live with these memories all the time:

Her memories of childhood were always at the edge of her consciousness, ready to be summoned up and incorporated into everyday moments, and she had an exquisite ability to describe the details of her recalled experiences.<sup>55</sup>

He likens remembering details and even emotions in this intense way to recalling a dream, but also points out that some people at the opposite extreme, ‘call up their past life only occasionally’. Kandel writes about the uses of memory, and specifically the recall of memory as an integral feature of the creative process, worked on by the imagination:

Recall of memory is a creative process. What the brain stores is thought to be only a core memory. Upon recall, this core memory is then elaborated upon and reconstructed, with subtractions, additions, elaborations, and distortions. What biological processes enable me to review my own history with such emotional vividness?<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Woolf, V., *Ibid.* p.87

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p.13 (Easter Sunday, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1919)

<sup>54</sup> Kandel, Eric R., ‘In search of memory’ (2007) cit. *Memory, An Anthology*, ed. Harvey Wood, H., & Byatt, A.S., (London: Vintage 2009), p. 153

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p.154

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p.155

Woolf comments that there is great pleasure or joy in recollecting the past, when the present is not turbulent:

The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking about the past; but that I am living most fully in the present.<sup>57</sup>

She went on to describe the past, ‘as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions.’<sup>58</sup> For a poet or writer this often uncharted territory may yield a rich and original source of material. When it is brought into the light it opens imaginative possibilities as well as the opportunity, ‘to set the darkness echoing.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p.98

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67

<sup>59</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist*, p.57

### [iii] Voices from the past

I am frequently asked what inspires my poetry. Intuitively, I write about people and places that interest me, yet inevitably I refer to the past in any present observation. Memories are a powerful catalyst for my poetic imagination and for many of the poems in this collection. A.S.Byatt writes in 'Memory and the Making of Fiction', that according to Sigmund Freud, our first worship was ancestor-worship:

Our immediate ancestors are, in some sort our memories – they disappear, as presences, as bodies, but they persist as icons, as hauntings in our minds. They take with them their memories of ourselves, so that part of us dies with them, as part of them persists in us.<sup>60</sup>

A.S.Byatt became more interested in her distant ancestors when her parents died, which had a subsequent impact on the subject matter of her stories. She writes, 'It is the point when one begins to feel one's own mortality' and 'what cannot be written will die with us.'<sup>61</sup> Our memories assume greater significance as we grow older, with no-one to remind us, and inherited family stories disappear with each generation into a more distant unrecoverable past. Unlike African culture, where in many languages there is one word for now, one for the future and forty words for the past,<sup>62</sup> we do not live as closely to the past; we are not forced to leave our homes and physically 'dig up the bones of our ancestors and take them with us'; we carry them inside us as memories.

I have found family photographs a valuable source of inspiration and a memory prompt for a number of poems in the collection. When we look at a photograph we are face to face with a reminder of our mortality, a 'memento mori'. A photograph of someone we know well, taken before we knew them presents a strange reality and a distant truth. When my parents died within a few weeks of each other at separate ends of the country, they had not lived together for over half their lives. Yet amongst my father's effects locked in an old tin box, there was a previously unseen photograph taken just after their engagement. It spoke of vulnerability, hopefulness and held a truth about their early

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<sup>60</sup> Byatt, A.S., 'Memory and the Making of Fiction,' *Memory: The Darwin College Lectures*, ed. Fara, P., and Patterson. K., (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1998), p. 53

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54

<sup>62</sup> Mankell, H., 'Africa opened my doors of perception', *The Times*, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010. This article inspired the poem 'Last Word' (TTB: 118)



relationship that I had hoped for as a child. I wrote 'This Old Photograph,' (TTB: 84) to describe my feelings:

This old photograph

Is the one I like the best, the one I think is true  
of my parents, before they married and grew into  
the people they had become when I knew them,

more ordinary than hopeful, weighed down by life,  
so that their leaning apart was something natural,  
something they might have expected to happen.

In the final two stanzas I concentrated on observing what I saw, finally concluding with the unforeseen future but without comment:

Here they are now, looking straight at the camera.  
Their young lives ready to begin after the war,  
happy, optimistic, shyly pleased with themselves.

His arm round her waist, her eyes on the future  
they imagine as blameless, a bright new world.  
And all of it waiting to happen, waiting to begin.

I have included this poem here as it illustrates a potential problem with using personal photographs as a trigger for memory and as inspiration for poetry. What is of great importance to us, our recorded autobiography that sheds light on some of our darkness, does not usually nudge a universal memory or emotion in a reader or audience. This poem needs further interpretation to be universally meaningful. Otherwise it exists on a purely personal level unless accompanied by the photograph, when it may achieve a more sympathetic response.

In *Camera Lucida*<sup>63</sup> Roland Barthes writes movingly of his search to find amongst his mother's photographs, the one photograph that would 'speak to him of her' that he would recognise. He eventually finds one of her aged five, in which he writes of 'rediscovering' her whole image, not in fragments as in other photographs of her posing for the camera, but as 'her true self', gentle and kind, a 'just' image. Barthes writes:

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<sup>63</sup> Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage 2000)

I had discovered this photograph by moving back through Time. The Greeks entered into Death backward: what they had before them was their past. In the same way I worked back through a life, not my own, but the life of someone I love.<sup>64</sup>

For Barthes the photograph does not call up the past or restore what has disappeared through time or distance, but it is proof that what he sees has once existed and that is what he finds so astonishing, rather in the manner of resurrection. A photograph authenticates whereas with writing there is no certainty, no absolute truth. I have experimented with other poems that use a photograph as inspiration, partly to tell a story but also because photographs too can disappear.

I was inspired to write the poem 'Cousin Tom,' (TTB:78) on finding two sepia photographs amongst inherited family artefacts. There was a scribbled sentence on the back of one of these. One was a studio photograph of Tom as a young boy, perhaps about ten years old, posing with his younger brothers and sisters in the early years of the last century. A strange familial likeness made me look twice at these long distant cousins of my grandfather but that was all. The second photograph was of a young man in army uniform. I made no association between these photographs until I turned the second over and read a message scrawled in pencil, '*Tom – killed by a German sniper, November 1918.*' My mind played with this scrap of information until I was also shown by chance, a small olive-wood bible from the same War, whose owner had survived against the odds. The bible, scarred but small enough to fit into a breast-pocket, had deflected a bullet away from his heart. Inside, next to certain passages of comfort, were laid pressed flowers, pansies from a garden. In an ancient book, entitled the *Language of Flowers*,<sup>65</sup> pansies signified 'thoughts' and from these strange and tenuous connections I began to write about Cousin Tom. Growing outwards from a central idea, the poem gathered momentum until I could shape it and cut back to the roots of what I wanted to say. By rigorously pruning what might have become an overlong poem, I also experimented with the tense, moving from the imaginary present back to the past reality:

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* Chapter 29, Page 71

<sup>65</sup> Pickston, M., *The Language of Flowers*, hand-written and painted in 1913 (London: Michael Joseph Ltd 1968)

Pass quickly over the blood-stained pages of his story  
in case he wakes, startled by our faces, hands searching  
pockets for the olive-wood bible - it's comforting words

half-hidden by flowers he had borrowed from the garden  
one last time, when a hopeful sun dazzled his choices.  
Viola, pansy, heart's ease, *'my thoughts are with you'*.

Turn back, before the sniper knew him in his sights.  
November dusk fell early, inhaling lives like smoke from  
a first cigarette - that pinprick of doubt - that lost breath.

The past evoked through artefacts and remains, is a powerful source of inspiration, reminding us of endings but also continuation. Many poets use historical references in their poems. The American poet and undertaker, Thomas Lynch writes movingly about the familiar orange Montbretia flower growing wild in Ireland. In his poem 'Monbretia',<sup>66</sup> he tells of the origins of the flower brought back carefully from a war in South Africa; his interpretation that 'the seedling planted in the great-house garden' leapt the stone walls 'in the beak of a bird/on gardener's boot or breeze'. This amount of detail in a poem based on factual evidence provides extra interest and a reference point for a reader and creates a shared understanding, a collective experience that may be very powerful.

In *How Poets Work*, Tony Curtis writes:

Precious are the moments when personal experiences and associations intersect with the shared poetic narrative we call history.<sup>67</sup>

When Carol Ann Duffy used the familiar recitation of the BBC Shipping Forecast to conclude her sonnet, 'Prayer', an exploration of personal and collective memory, she evoked a shared past:

Darkness outside. Inside the radio's prayer,  
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lynch, T., *Walking Papers, Poems 1999-2009* (London: Cape 2010), p.5

<sup>67</sup> Curtis, T., (Editor) *How Poets Work* (Wales: Seren 1996), p.26

<sup>68</sup> Duffy, C.A., *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin 1994), p.127

Similarly, in a recent poem 'Last Post,'<sup>69</sup> a moving reversal of history written to mark the funerals of the two last soldiers of the Great War, Duffy admits the impotence of poetry in the face of such suffering and horror, 'If poetry could truly tell it backwards/then it would.' Now that the voices of the last first-hand witnesses are silent it is an especially poignant poem.

Increasingly, as I began to move away from intensely personal subject matter, my poems often included factual evidence or a specific point of reference for the reader. In a more recent poem, 'Van Gogh's Moonrise' (TTB: 115), I was initially inspired by a piece of scientific research<sup>70</sup> which seemed to prove beyond doubt that a painting by Van Gogh, (previously numbered as part of a series and untitled), was a representation of a full moon rising and not as was originally thought, the setting sun. Furthermore, scientists could pinpoint exactly where and when it was painted:

What we know now is precisely where he stood, the painter,  
his vision angled to capture the scene. Not seated at an easel,  
straw hat half-shielding his face, but at a distant high window.

I was able to use a simple narrative style to describe my own interpretation of dusk in a cornfield based on personal experience but also with reference to the scientific research:

Dusk begins to bloom in corners, taking edges off the field  
where fat sheaves stand expectantly, violet, ochre, gold.  
The stars tell us, as they have always told us; now we know

exactly when the painter saw the cornfield, how long his eye held  
the view as light faded. The full moon taking her time, a too-heavy  
woman climbing the sky, face flushed with the heat of summer.

I enjoy re-inventing a landscape as much as telling a story. My natural instinct is to be firstly an observer, whether aurally as an eavesdropper on a conversation or visually to record the minute details of a changing scene. My training as an artist before becoming a poet has been invaluable; not least for the sustained, imaginative process that a painter employs before naming an experience. Paradoxically, a barrier to writing poetry

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<sup>69</sup> Duffy, C.A., 'Last Post', *The Times*, Friday July 31<sup>st</sup> 2009

<sup>70</sup> Leake, J., Chittenden, M., 'Astronomy solves puzzles posed by Hamlet and Van Gogh', *The Sunday Times*, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2010. The painting, 'Moonrise' was produced on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1889 at 9.08pm.

can be that words and language are *too* influential and at the forefront of the mind before the imagination has had time to transform an experience into an idea that may become the poem, thus constricting the creative thoughts.

Certainly I am aware when an idea for a poem is hovering, although it may take some time to be realised. It may begin with a few words, inspired by something I hear or an article I read, as in 'Van Gogh's Moonrise', or something unusual I see. I do not have the luxury of writing full-time, so small moments become more important. I find I am usually alert to possibilities that may one day become a poem or be included in one, even when I am busy elsewhere. When I do have an idea I think about it, not in terms of 'reverie' or even day-dreaming, but subconsciously it stays close by until I write a few words or a phrase in a note-book. Seamus Heaney describes the crucial action as 'pre-verbal, to be able to allow the first alertness or come-hither, sensed in a blurred or incomplete way, to dilate and approach as a thought or a theme or a phrase'.<sup>71</sup>

Once committed to paper it rests, until I have dedicated time to be able to explore it further and this personally is the most exciting as well as exacting aspect of the creative process. Then I know I have to find the space to allow my imagination to work simultaneously with language to make something new that has never been said before, at least not in the same way.

As an artist, I experienced the same joy once a painting was sketched out and ready to begin the process of making, with that close focus of attention between vision and craft. Poetry demands as great a focus of concentration, but also requires a mental discipline that involves the use of language in its many forms, to find the exact words to express what I want to say.

In Chapter Two, I consider the influence of Seamus Heaney on my developing voice. His use of language, imagery and symbolism continues to inspire my writing with possibilities, whilst his imaginative and sensitive engagement with his past has encouraged me to explore my own.

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<sup>71</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.49

## Chapter Two

### A Matter of Wonder

‘And that moment when the bird sings very close  
To the music of what happens,’<sup>72</sup>  
Seamus Heaney

In the early poetry of Seamus Heaney,<sup>73</sup> I found an exciting voice I could respond to when exploring my own emerging poetic voice. I recognised a strength of language and imagery that inspired me, partly because it seemed natural and close to what I imagined to be his speaking voice. This made the poetry direct and accessible. Later, when I read autobiographical accounts of Heaney’s country childhood,<sup>74</sup> in conjunction with the poems, I found immediacy and a personal connection that made the poems memorable. The reason for this response, according to Heaney,<sup>75</sup> is that poetic voice is connected to the natural voice in an idealised way; something in these poems resounded with my emerging voice, my sense of self and touched a nerve. I read them aloud, enjoying the rhythms and sounds, the cadence, the freshness of imagery and detailed description of a moment in time, a sense impression, of the past brought into the present.

In his first published volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*,<sup>76</sup> there are many examples of the sensual imagery that first excited me. ‘Blackberry-picking,’<sup>77</sup> explores the experience and the joy, the visual impact of the first fruit, ‘a glossy purple clot’ and ‘summer’s blood was in it’ to the lust of picking more as soon as they were ripe, ‘until the cans were full’ and ‘big dark blobs burned like plates of eyes’. The second stanza describes the disappointment when the fruit does not keep: ‘We found a fur, a rat-grey fungus glutting on our cache’ and then the remembered emotion and with it a loss of childhood innocence:

I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not.

<sup>72</sup> Heaney, S., lines from ‘Song,’ *Field-Work* (London: Faber 1979), p. 56

<sup>73</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *Field Work* (1979)

<sup>74</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p.17

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.44

<sup>76</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p.20

I remember first reading this poem and rolling the last three lines around my tongue for the sheer pleasure of the rhythm and musicality, as well as the contained emotion expressed so eloquently in the final rhyme. None of the language in these last lines is elaborate or could be described as exceptional, and yet the poem closes memorably.

Much later when I came to write two poems about owls, included in this collection, I recognised Heaney's distant influence in both the visual imagery I chose and the closing line. I reflect now that I frequently use a single line to end a poem with a memorable image, which can of course be a high-risk strategy if it is weak and dilutes the poem. What comes before has to be strong enough to do it justice. In the poem, 'December' (TTB: 104), the central narrative is of a young barn owl that flew blindly into my car on a busy dual-carriageway on a winter's evening. I could neither avoid nor rescue it. In my mind I held two images, one of white outstretched wings and the other a view in the rear mirror of feathers in suspension, falling through the air. At home five miles later, in a heightened emotional state, the tension between seeing fleetingly a barn owl and grief at its probable demise, released an energy that became the poem. At the time I was writing a sequence of poems about the full moon, which became the starting point:

A cold moon, named for its brightness, hangs in a frame of sky.  
Somewhere an owl stirs, restless with knowledge that tonight

is the best chance for hunting.

Into this poem I put my experience of observing a pair of barn owls rear young the previous summer, to describe the young owl's shaky flight and the moment our worlds collided. The final three lines which contained the emotion, closed with the last image I saw:

To think of him lucky and alive  
would be one way of coping with the truth. This poem is another.

Like ghostly confetti he is floating away, feather by feather.

In 'Mid-term Break',<sup>78</sup> Heaney uses a more conversational tone to describe a tragic family event; the death of his younger brother, which is not immediately apparent at the beginning of the poem. This poem builds up the tension, 'In the porch I met my father crying', 'whispers informed strangers I was the eldest', 'as my mother held my hand and coughed out angry tearless sighs' until the reason for the grief is revealed line by slow line:

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops  
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him  
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,  
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.  
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Heaney himself says of writing the poem:

I was extremely innocent as a writer. I had no forethought. I wrote it quickly. I wrote it because it was February and I was thinking about Christopher's Anniversary...The intimacy of the memory, that was the real inspiration and the main effort at the time I suppose, was to re-enter that intimacy.<sup>79</sup>

His early poems in *Death of a Naturalist*,<sup>80</sup> and *Door into the Dark*,<sup>81</sup> established Heaney as a poet who could use words to convey a weight of feeling. In his descriptions of sights, sounds and smells often viewed through the lens of childhood, there was much more than a purely physical sensation. Choosing words that verbalise feeling around an experience or observation transforms a poem into a memorable experience.

I learned much about the power of word choices from these early poems; how a single word carries its own energy as well as meaning and inference; how words can surprise and shock as in the final single line of 'Mid-term Break'; how words 'hold' the rhythm together. Beyond this too, appreciation of how syllables within words can be used to

<sup>78</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist*, p.28

<sup>79</sup> Gammage, N., 'Interview with Seamus Heaney' (*Thumbscrew Magazine* No 19, Autumn 2001) p.6

<sup>80</sup> Heaney, S., *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Heaney, S., *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber 1969)



great effect, opened up possibilities in my own writing. I began to consider my existing poems in more detail at this point, examining more objectively how I chose the exact language to express what I wanted to say. Reading other poetry aloud enabled me to unpick some of the formalities of writing a poem and make comparisons with my own. Initially, I found it difficult to find ‘bearings’ within my poems, as there were few regular formal features. I instinctively attached language (primarily at this earlier stage, I was still mesmerised by the possibilities of language and imagery) to a structure that ‘sounded’ right when I read it aloud. I did not yet know enough about the inner laws, however flexible, that give poetry its wonderful strength and its musicality. Instead, many early poems arrived by chance, following the movement of the speaking voice, but not necessarily paying much attention to metre or line-management.<sup>82</sup>

In my poem ‘On an owl electrocuted by a high wire’, (TTB:106) I had the opportunity to experiment with language within the original context of shocking and extraordinary subject matter. Based on first-hand experience of coming across a young tawny owl hanging from electricity cables, almost camouflaged by the summer growth of the trees it had failed to reach, I wanted to capture something of its undiminished beauty and grisly death as well as my emotional response. I revisited the original sensations I had experienced, transforming these first sense impressions into a language that would be powerful enough to name the experience. ‘Breaching the hill, up among the summer-laden trees’/‘a young owl, freshly hung’/‘a small trapeze artist holding the secret of flight’/‘a caricature of tawny feathers’/‘grotesque but intact, untouched by crow or magpie/ undisturbed by bluebottle or wasp.’

I chose powerful, dramatic and tense language to describe the shock ‘that had blown his mind open to the possibility of forever.’ The final section of the poem describes the steady deterioration and present reality:

An upside-down half-open umbrella of slack feathers  
he hung, bat-like, the spokes of his wings exposed  
to public view.

The ending when it came was sudden. The owl had disappeared in ‘an invisible stain of decay,’ before ‘the final unrehearsed free-fall into the hedgerow.’

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<sup>82</sup> This aspect is discussed further in Chapter 2, p. 40.41, and Chapter 4, p 65, 66

In addition to the use of language, imagery and symbolism which had made such an impression on me years earlier as a relatively inexperienced poet, I admire Heaney's ability to revisit his childhood memories so vividly, especially with reference to the people and places that were important to him. Across the range of his poetry, there are family voices that are familiar to the reader through conversations, real or imagined. In some poems, Heaney uses his mother's conversational tone to create an atmosphere of ordinariness as the backdrop for the emotional content as in 'A Call': <sup>83</sup>

'Hold on', she said, I'll just run out and get him.  
The weather here's so good, he took the chance  
To do a bit of weeding'...

In his mind's eye the poet sees his distant father gardening, and as he waits on the end of the phone, hears and pictures his home where the hall-clock ticks and 'where the phone lay unattended in a calm/Of mirror glass and suns truck pendulums...' His mind plays on the idea that this is how 'Death' might call and then ends memorably:

Next thing he spoke and I nearly said I loved him. <sup>84</sup>

His mother appears strongly in a sequence of sonnets, 'Clearances', dedicated to her memory. In writing about my own mother in several poems in this collection, I was reminded of these sonnets especially these moving final lines at his mother's deathbed, when he is thinking of a childhood memory of peeling potatoes together:

I remembered her head bent towards my head,  
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –  
Never closer the whole rest of our lives. <sup>85</sup>

In Heaney's poem, 'The Swing', he describes his hard-working mother bathing her swollen feet, 'one at a time/in the enamel basin', 'she took each rolled elastic stocking and drew it on/like the life she would not fail and was/meant for'.

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<sup>83</sup> Heaney, S., *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber 1996), p.53

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53

<sup>85</sup> Heaney, S., 'Clearances' Sonnet 3, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Faber 1990), p. 227

And once, when she'd scoured the basin,  
 She came and sat to please us on the swing,  
 Neither out of place or in her element,  
 Just tempted by it for a moment only,  
 Half-retrieving something half-confounded.  
 Instinctively we knew to let her be.<sup>86</sup>

This poem with its energetic introduction of the physical sensations of the rope-swing in the open shed, creates perfectly the childhood scene and places his mother at the still centre, 'She sat there, as majestic as an empress.'<sup>87</sup>

At the end of the poem Heaney writes metaphorically of the future where:

In spite of all, we sailed  
 Beyond ourselves and over and above  
 The rafters aching in our shoulder blades,  
 The give and take of branches in our arms.

Heaney stated later that 'the image I have of her in this poem is literally, almost transgressively true. It's 'photography' but also, I hope, 'heart-mystery.'<sup>88</sup>

Many of Heaney's childhood memories surface in his poetry, not only in the earliest poems where they are most visible but also in later poems such as 'Clearances'<sup>89</sup> and in his latest volume *Human Chain*.<sup>90</sup> It is a recurrent theme which Heaney acknowledges and with which the reader becomes familiar, 'Whatever poetic success I've had has come from staying within the realm of my own imaginative country and my own voice.'<sup>91</sup> I am attracted to the 'child's eye view' deep within Heaney that sees the 'extraordinary' in the 'ordinary;' his view that 'what I had taken as a matter of fact as a youngster became a matter of wonder in memory.'<sup>92</sup>

In the poem, 'Sunlight,'<sup>93</sup> Heaney lovingly describes his Aunt Mary who lived on the family farm and was a central figure in his childhood. He sets the scene 'There was a

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<sup>86</sup> Heaney, S., *The Spirit Level*, p. 49

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48

<sup>88</sup> O' Driscoll, D., *Stepping Stones, Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, p. 310

<sup>89</sup> Heaney, S., 'Clearances', *The Haw Lantern*, p. 24-32

<sup>90</sup> Heaney, S., *Human Chain*

<sup>91</sup> Heaney, S., Interview with John Haffenden, *Viewpoints, Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber 1981), p. 69

<sup>92</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 48

<sup>93</sup> Heaney, S., *North* (London: Faber 1975), p. 9 (ix)

sunlit absence' in the room yet outside 'the sun stood like a griddle cooling against the wall of each afternoon,' and then introduces her, bringing her into the kitchen of the poem and the present, 'Now she dusts the board with a goose's wing'. We can imagine the young boy watching her work and then the pause to wait for the scones to rise, where 'she sits, broad - lapped with whitened nails and measling shins.'

Finally we have the controlled ending, which gathers up all the contained emotion of the poem:

And here is love  
like a tin-smith's scoop  
sunk past its gleam  
in the meal-bin.<sup>94</sup>

In *Stepping Stones*,<sup>95</sup> Heaney reminisces in a series of illuminating interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, which shed light on his development as a poet but also illustrate his phenomenal power of memory and recollection evidenced in many personal poems. It is the smallest details of remembering place, in particular the farm where he grew up in Mossbawn, that lend such physicality to his early poems such as 'Churning Day'.<sup>96</sup> On being questioned why he felt he needed to get the butter-making activity 'into such exact evocative words so early in his life,' Heaney replied:

It was more a case of personal securing...an entirely intuitive move to restoring something to yourself. You're also dealing with the unpredictable, the way one memory can unexpectedly open the writing channels and get you going.<sup>97</sup>

On being asked what it was like in the Mossbawn kitchen, Heaney described in minute detail (notably in the present tense) what would nowadays be a virtual tour of the space, enabled by having lived an impressionable part of his childhood in one place:

It's only small I suppose, but I didn't particularly feel that at the time. The floor is cement – concrete would be too hard-and-fast a word for the generally gravelly composition – it's smoothy-crumblly, and at one place there's a little corroded hollow where we pour out milk for the cats.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p.10 (x)

<sup>95</sup> O'Driscoll, D., *Stepping Stones*, p. 16

<sup>96</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 21

<sup>97</sup> O'Driscoll, D., *Ibid.* p. 16-17

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p.12

The notion of intuitively writing a poem to personally secure a memory is one that I can empathise with. So too is the way that in conversation with others, memories can be suddenly unearthed, or in photographs or objects, a mirror is held up to our past.

In 'Feeling into Words,'<sup>99</sup> Heaney describes one function of poetry as 'revelation of the self to the self,' comparing poems to archaeological finds. He likens the poet to a 'water-diviner' in the sense of 'making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised.'<sup>100</sup>

I revisited physically and metaphorically many of the early poems of Heaney when I married into a large farming family over thirty years ago. Suddenly what had up until then been a matter of interest became a way of life. I saw at first-hand what it feels like to have real roots and connectedness to the land. I lived and breathed the sights, smells and sounds, experiencing the immediacy, those life and death moments, that hard daily graft that goes hand in hand with animal husbandry and land management. I empathised with the wife in Heaney's poem, 'The Wife's Tale', whose job it was to take tea out to the harvest field and make proud murmurings about the seed crop, 'Always this inspection has to be made/Even when I don't know what to look for.'

And that was it. I'd come and he had shown me  
So I belonged no further to the work.  
I gathered cups and folded up the cloth  
And went. But they still kept their ease  
Spread out, unbuttoned, grateful under the trees.<sup>101</sup>

Farming had not changed significantly in those early days and perhaps still had more in common with the past than the future agribusiness it would duly become. We also visited relatives and friends in Southern Ireland, firstly in the late 1970's, and saw at first-hand the farmsteads with the old horse-barn next door, although many farmers were beginning to move out into new bungalows that could be selected from a catalogue and built close by. This was pre-Common-Market and the subsequent transformation of Southern Ireland but the old culture was visibly changing. Politically it seemed far away from the Troubles in the North but the I.R.A. collection boxes and

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<sup>99</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48

<sup>101</sup> Heaney, S., *Opened Ground, Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber 1998), p.24

the patriotic songs were evident in the Bars in South West Ireland at that time. With each visit I made a new connection with the poetry of Seamus Heaney and gained a greater understanding of the general although not specific context out of which he wrote. Even though I have never personally visited Northern Ireland, my ancestors including my great-grandmother were Irish, and emigrated to Scotland from Northern Ireland during the Great Famine of 1847. I heard their voices in the cliff-top graveyards filled with Celtic crosses and the derelict deserted settlements, which prompted some early poems.<sup>102</sup>

I wrote a more recent poem inspired by a visit to an Irish Art Gallery that is included in this collection. 'Magdalenes'(TTB:112 ) was inspired by an art-work constructed of an old iron laundry basket found in a convent basement. The artist had also found a register of names, of young girls, who had been confined there until their illegitimate babies were born. She embroidered these names on strips of pure white cotton, attached to the basket. These girls were known as 'Magdalenes', with the obvious connotation. I wanted to tell their story. 'We stare, affronted, find comfort in the rosary of names/ white feathers tied artfully so that they would be remembered/one by one, lifted from the long shadows into the sun.'

When I began to write more seriously as a poet I recognised that I did not have a strong sense of personal place in terms of a physical environment I felt I belonged to, or more importantly wanted to write about. My earliest memories are fractured ones, of moving house frequently, within the same area but with no sense of real attachment. Later aged fifteen, a major move from the Midlands to the South, following my mother's re-marriage, changed a whole way of life. When I write about people I rarely see or place them *inside* a space, a house or a building, preferring to have them inhabit an open area in my mind; sometimes a doorway features in the poem or a field-gate. This is a recent discovery since analysing my poems more closely. However, having now lived in an East Sussex village for many more years than I spent in the Midlands, this is the nearest place I can call 'home' and I love living here. It is where I live and work and where my most significant relationships are, where my children call 'home', yet I have never really felt 'at home' or the same strong sense of belonging as if born here. I envied those poets, like Heaney with a real sense of attachment to 'place' in their hearts.

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<sup>102</sup> Not included in the collection of poems.

After my father-in-law died, I wrote several poems in celebration of his long association with the land. Again I am reminded of the influence that Heaney's poetry had on my developing voice, this time for the earthiness and physicality of language. I was given an ancient map of the old field names on the farm that were used for centuries and are still in use today. I heard poetry in the names alone and they became the inspiration for the poem 'Naming the Fields,' (TTB: 89). The author Ronald Blythe described exactly what I wanted to say in his more recent introduction to *Men and the Fields*, 'This is what fields do, they remain. But their men do not.'<sup>103</sup>

A thousand years ago might have seen you striding  
across these meadows, shaping out rough paces. A gift,  
lifting you out of the ordinary. Horizoning the sky;

*Hook Pasture - Fox-Earth - Little Slugg's Eye.*

I am aware that the syntax of this poem is unusual, with its irregular metre and shortened statements, for example, 'horizoning the sky' before leading to the three field names that close the poem. The word 'horizoning' also stretches the boundaries of word-usage as well as the imagination but having chosen it, I felt it suited its purpose and made the poem memorable. As well as the field-names themselves, it is a particularly exciting word to say aloud. Recently, when compiling this collection, I re-read this poem and was reminded of the powerful ending of a poem by Ted Hughes, 'Hearing the horizons endure'<sup>104</sup> that caused me to consider subconscious influences on my early writing.

However, writing now with more experience, I might well give attention to the overall form of this poem and consider in a more measured way the structure of each line and its ending, rather than concentrate on the visual impact of the poem on the page. Did it balance, did it look right? I considered how much value I placed on opening an unknown book of poetry and just by glancing at a poem before reading the content, know whether I might enjoy it.

I was not solely reading the poetry of Seamus Heaney at this time and whilst I acknowledge here his his major influence on my writing and development, other poets also inspired me, many with Irish or Celtic connections and rootedness in place.

<sup>103</sup> Bell, A., *Men and the Fields* (Dorset: Dovecote Press 2009), p.11 (Introduction by Ronald Blythe)

<sup>104</sup> Hughes, T., *The Horses, Hawk in the Rain, New Selected Poems* (New York: Harper and Row), p.7

Michael Longley introduced me to lists; to the power of the litany on the page, of flower names and history and remembering. Eavan Boland also inspired me with her poems of love, myth and memory with a feminine edge. Gillian Clarke, the Welsh poet, wrote strong rural poems from a farming background that I could connect to easily, and I enjoyed the intelligence of Robert Frost, whom I could hear in the voice of Heaney.

As I became a more confident poet and self-critical, I could see where my own voice was beginning to distinguish itself from others to become more than an imitation of those I had long admired. I wanted to know much more about the crafting of poetry which experienced poets like Heaney made seem easy and natural. I experimented with an early sonnet form in 'Condolences' (TTB: 73)<sup>105</sup> and more recently, 'September' (TTB: 101) which I also revised and returned again to a 'long line' format that better suited the content of the poem. In hindsight, my insecurity about using a formal metrical pattern inaccurately meant in practice that I hesitated over line-endings, often at the expense of fluency. I was drawn to two, three and four line stanzas with frequently a single line or rhyming couplet to finish the poem. I relied on my developing 'ear' to know when a poem sounded right, and studied poems for clues to a metrical pattern that I felt comfortable with. I was also aware that my poems might be considered 'over formal' or 'old-fashioned' when compared with a freer verse, and anxious to avoid this, I experimented with different forms, returning to my own familiar style each time. This experimentation was necessary but I needed to hear my own distinct voice in every poem.

The poem 'September' (TTB: 101) combined my affinity for nature and the countryside with my experience of farming and as a central concern here, an abiding interest in art. Other art forms are often a stimulus for writing, not solely in terms of what the painting or piece directly inspires, as ekphrasis,<sup>106</sup> but for the creative impulse it generates that encourages divergent thought.

This poem is one of a sequence of twelve poems which were inspired by archaic names for the full moon each month, and has its origins in a painting by Samuel Palmer,

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<sup>105</sup> The sonnet version of this poem is discussed in Chapter 3, p.56

<sup>106</sup> Ekphrasis : 'an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary' Oxford Classical Dictionary 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1996



*Cornfield by Moonlight, with Evening Star*.<sup>107</sup> I came across this painting by accident, but was already familiar with it from years earlier when I studied art history. In revisiting it, my mind played with images from the recent past, when I would walk down the rows of stubble in the corn-field in the early evening, often walking a dog after the day's work harvesting the wheat was over. It was still possible to feel the day's energy in the cooling air. This has a certain resonance, although unintentional, with Heaney's poem, 'The Harvest Bow'.<sup>108</sup> I also felt a sense of sadness on looking at this painting, which seemed to represent loss of a way of life, since the family farm had been sold and the freedom to wander the fields had gone. I began and ended the poem with an image of the moon:

In between seasons, twilight and night, the harvest moon hangs heavy:  
a slow-ripening plum remembering the blush of lost summer heat.

In the next three stanzas, I described what I imagined to be in the painting, 'phantom workers, gleaners bent/over the stubble, lifting and re-lifting history.' Then finally, the memory-image, showing how memories associate with one another:

I think of your father, and flesh him out again, face flushed at the end  
of a burnt day, walking the field-edge with his dogs, a late observance.

Perfect art of watchful presence; the moon sees what the heart imagines.

In writing this poem, which originally had several experimental versions, I was aware that the length of each line, with an average of sixteen syllables, was at the limits of what might be called poetry. When does poetry become prose? I knew that I subconsciously used a longer line than most of my contemporaries, when reading aloud from their poems or mine. I began to consider differences between poetry and prose in the context of my writing and it came down primarily to line-endings. I knew that I often kept a long line going between stanzas in a poem weaving a pattern through the metre. My poems do have a similar 'feel' to them as a result of using a form I feel

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<sup>107</sup> *Cornfield by Moonlight, with Evening star*, by Samuel Palmer (C.1830) is available to view online in several versions, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/online\\_tours/britain/samuel\\_palmer](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/online_tours/britain/samuel_palmer)

<sup>108</sup> Heaney, S., 'The Harvest Bow', *Field Work* (London: Faber 1979), p. 58. This poem describes memories of Heaney's father through the poignant image of his hand-made corn harvest bow.

comfortable with after experimenting over several years with different poetic forms. The poems sound like my speaking voice and I realise that I tend to speak and write naturally in longer sentences. In *How Poets Work*, Tony Curtis describes the line break as defining the poem:

The meaning of poetry is essentially bound up in its form. Poetry is a superior form of expression to all prose forms of language because it adds to the sentence and paragraph that powerful device of the line; it is the line break, the unjustified right margin which distinguishes poetry from all other uses of language.

In poetry the line is the unit of significance as well as the sentence and the tension between these two controls allows the poet to control the fourth dimension of time.<sup>109</sup>

Further analysis and discussion with other poets has revealed an accent that I hardly knew I still had from my childhood in the Midlands. I use a short pronunciation of vowel sounds especially ‘a’, which gives a ‘flat’ texture to words and frequently a different stress pattern. Interestingly this accent is most obvious when reading aloud from my own poetry which is intriguing, as if it is my real ‘true’ voice, the original one that I subconsciously disguise in everyday speech. Now I am more conscious of this, I listen for the smallest inflections in a word and I realise why it is crucially important to hear poets reading their own work to fully understand the original voice inside their head. I remain convinced that I was initially drawn to the voices of Seamus Heaney and other Celtic poets because I heard something of myself in the language at a deep level I did not fully understand.

In a discussion on his own Yorkshire dialect, Ted Hughes made this point:

Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom...it’s your childhood self-there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Curtis, T., *How Poets Work*, p. 22

<sup>110</sup> Hughes, T., Interview *London Magazine* January 1971, cited Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 156

In Chapter Three, I explore further the impact of the childhood self on the adult writer, by focusing on Virginia Woolf, to identify how and when she found her true writing voice. Her autobiographical writing and prolific diaries illustrate how she transformed her childhood experiences and memories effectively into ground-breaking fiction.

## Chapter Three

### A Matter of Being

‘I make it real by putting it into words.  
It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole’<sup>111</sup>  
Virginia Woolf

I turn now from poetry to prose since my poetry has on occasion been described as prosaic with elements of story-telling that often have more affinity with prose. As a developing poet with an emerging poetic voice, I find I am influenced and inspired by prose especially if it is ‘poetic’ and has a natural rhythm and cadence. I am interested in capturing ‘silence’ in a poem as well as its musicality; that all-elusive pause or sense of space for a reader or listener to respond is more commonly found in prose with its longer line and conversational tone.

Virginia Woolf has influenced and inspired aspects of my writing, as well as providing a vast source of material in her diaries and letters for a sequence of poems, ‘Observations’ (TTB:69-75). Through giving shape and meaning to her memories, thoughts and questions in her novels, by ‘putting it into words,’ she made sense of her fractured life experiences, past and present, and ‘made it whole.’ Like Seamus Heaney she had a wealth of childhood memories to draw down:

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills  
and fills - then my bowl without a doubt, stands upon this memory.<sup>112</sup>

In her autobiographical essay ‘A Sketch of the Past,’<sup>113</sup> Woolf refers to her earliest childhood memories. Encouraged by her sister Vanessa to write a late memoir, aged nearly sixty in 1939-40, she embarked on an exploration of memory that is both insightful and significant in terms of understanding the impact of her personal life experiences on her writing. She had little time to write anything other than a sketch, being engaged with writing biography,<sup>114</sup> but this lends immediacy to her sense-

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<sup>111</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p. 72

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61

<sup>114</sup> Virginia Woolf was engaged in writing *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press 1940)

impressions of the past that allow the opportunity to see at first-hand the quality and detail of her memory. Isolating those first childhood memories from ‘the enormous number of things I can remember,’<sup>115</sup> was key since one memory leads to another and opens up ‘pictures in the mind,’ which she then qualified because, ‘sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word.’<sup>116</sup> Before the age of three, memory is generally thought to be less reliable as ‘fact’; a mixture of memories and handed-down stories blur to create an ‘agreed’ memory, (such as Heaney’s story of being lost amongst the pea-drills).<sup>117</sup> Yet Woolf recalled vividly the smallest sensuous details, which would provide rich material for her imaginative fiction all her life.

Her earliest memory unsurprisingly was of her mother, a central figure in her life until Woolf was thirteen, when her mother died. It is not a hazy half-formed image but rather resembles photographic memory in its fine detail:

I begin: the first memory.

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress; and she was sitting in either a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones I suppose.<sup>118</sup>

This interests me for several reasons. Firstly, it is possible to see how a memory-image develops once given sustained attention, with the addition of ‘blue’ to the flowers and then ‘anemones’ as the mind processes the information. Secondly, the contrast of the material of the dress (the tangible sense-image) is remembered in some detail as opposed to the method of transport which only recollects a certain motion involved in travelling. Later Woolf adds more texture to this memory:

Certainly there she was, in the centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p. 64

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67

<sup>117</sup> O’Driscoll, D., *Stepping Stones, Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, p. 16 (reference to a half-memory)

<sup>118</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p. 64

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81

Remembering her mother in such a physical sense caused Woolf to try to explain why she found describing her feelings for her mother, as well as describing her as a person, so difficult. She admitted being obsessed with her mother until she finished *To the Lighthouse* when she was forty-four: 'I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my doings. She was one of those invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.'<sup>120</sup> This book was closer to autobiography than any other novel Woolf wrote and she commented:

I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice. I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and laid it to rest.<sup>121</sup>

Virginia Woolf puzzled over the way in which her strong feelings for her mother were diluted, 'my vision of her and my feeling for her' by '*explaining*' them through the character of Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*. By this time she would have heard of Freud,<sup>122</sup> and the novel concentrates on the inner workings of the mind which so excited Woolf. As she was beginning to write she noted in her diary,<sup>123</sup> 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new-----by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?' It *was* an elegy, for her long-dead parents and her brother and half-sister whose early deaths had also shocked her at an impressionable age.

Woolf was aware that this novel was in preparation and that it would be different, as well as a natural development from her previous books. Her style was loosening; she had noted with pleasure in her diary two years earlier, 'how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters,'<sup>124</sup> and felt more confident with each novel she wrote. As soon as one novel was ending, her mind toyed with the next idea. She had also begun to read Proust, reluctantly acknowledging, 'he will, I suppose both influence me and make me out of temper with every sentence of my own.'<sup>125</sup> By May 1925 she was ready to begin *To the Lighthouse*, although she planned to let it 'simmer' for a while. She noted, 'This

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p. 80

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81

<sup>122</sup> Note: VW did not actually meet Freud until 1939, when he presented her with a Narcissus.

<sup>123</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary* (Saturday June 27<sup>th</sup> 1925), p. 80

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60 (Thursday August 30<sup>th</sup> 1923) Reference to *The Hours* (work in progress)

<sup>125</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p. 72 (Entry -Tuesday April 8<sup>th</sup> 1925)

is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; and mother's; and St Ives; and childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in – life, death etc. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting, "We perish each alone", while he crushes a dying mackerel.'<sup>126</sup>

Interestingly, at this time, she also revealed in her diary that she had previously experienced some difficulties 'finding her voice,' in spite of having several books published to growing acclaim:

One thing in considering my mind now, seems to me beyond dispute; that I have at last, bored down into my oil well, and can't scribble fast enough to bring it all to the surface. I have now at least 6 stories welling up in me, and feel, at last, that I can coin all my thoughts into words... I have not until now had much faith in my novels, or thought them my own expression.<sup>127</sup>

In *To the Lighthouse*, she found the method or technique she had been searching for and had begun to practise in earlier novels.<sup>128</sup> I refer to Seamus Heaney's definition of technique here as opposed to craft, the skill of making, which is 'what you can learn from other verse.' He writes:

Technique is the discovery of ways to go out of his (the poet's) normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art.<sup>129</sup>

Woolf continued to explore ways to raid the inarticulate by developing her theories of an outer and inner 'self,' everyday existence contrasted with 'moments of being,' she defined as transcendental experiences, imbued with emotion. Her characters are fluid and changeable, growing and alive, because there are no limits imposed on their personalities by the author. This involved reaching deep into states of consciousness, getting underneath the everyday skin of her characters into what she named their 'second selves',<sup>130</sup> what was not said aloud but remained hidden in a private 'stream of

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<sup>126</sup> Woolf, V., *Ibid.* p. 76-77 (Entry -Thursday May 14<sup>th</sup> 1925)

<sup>127</sup> Woolf, V., *Ibid.* p. 74 (Entry -Monday April 20<sup>th</sup> 1925)

<sup>128</sup> Woolf, V., *Jacob's Room*, (London: Penguin 1992)

<sup>129</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 47

<sup>130</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p. 75 (Monday April 27<sup>th</sup> 1925)

consciousness' she would tap into. It was therefore easier to begin with people she knew well, whose reality she could empathise with before fictionalising it in a novel.

Leonard Woolf called *To the Lighthouse*, entirely new, 'a psychological poem,'<sup>131</sup> when it was finished. Certainly it had an innovative format, with a minimal plot in three scenes; 'The Window,' 'Time Passes,' and 'The Lighthouse.' Set in the years immediately preceding and following World War One, and sited on the Isle of Skye, it played with concepts of psychological time alternating with chronological time. In 'The Window,' the whole first section of the novel describes in minute detail one afternoon, when time seems to stand still, as it always seems to be endless when childhood summer days are remembered. In 'Time Passes,' with its echoes of Proust, the story-line changes to chronological time, with the inevitable sadness and loss it brings. It reverts in the final section, 'The Lighthouse,' back to psychological time. The characters move in and out of scenes, playing out their inner thoughts, opinions and lives.

The family house sits at the still centre like a witness to events and as a backdrop to the narrative medium which is memory. This weaves in and out of Woolf's characterisation without sentimentality. Woolf's memories of a happy childhood, especially of family holidays in St Ives, were very close to the surface in her mind and could be recalled easily. Her abiding real-life memory which features in several novels<sup>132</sup> was of the sea heard from her nursery:

It is of lying half-asleep, half-awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.<sup>133</sup>

Woolf imbued these physical sensations with intense emotion. She describes sights, sounds and smells as almost indistinguishable in her rapture, of being there in the

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p.103 (Saturday January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1927)

<sup>132</sup> Most notably in *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press 1931) and *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth Press 1927).

<sup>133</sup> Woolf, V., p. 64-65



garden or walking down to the beach; sensual impressions that she would have liked to paint, 'in pale yellow, silver and green.'<sup>134</sup> She comments on these two strong memories, of St Ives and of her mother in the centre of it all:

But the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete.<sup>135</sup>

In the character of Mrs Ramsey, Woolf created a whole and believable person of huge warmth and charm, much as she remembered her own mother, at the centre of a large family. Her characterisation impressed Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, who on reading the novel commented:

You have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character...it was like meeting her again with oneself grown-up and on equal terms.<sup>136</sup>

Woolf gives Mrs Ramsey a private inner world of feelings, quiet moments of 'being' when she is her 'real' self, and not the self she portrays to others. This aspect of the novel and in particular, the way in which the reader is drawn in to these inner musings, not only of Mrs Ramsey but other characters, gives it an emotional strength and makes it innovative and more like poetry in the way in which a poem encapsulates emotion in a few carefully chosen words. In the following extract Mrs Ramsey has gained herself a small window of peace:

She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others...When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed endless...this core of darkness could go anywhere, for no-one saw it.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67

<sup>136</sup> Extract from a letter from Vanessa Bell, dated May 11<sup>th</sup> 1927. VW commented how pleased she was to receive such praise from her sister, in her diary entry of May 16<sup>th</sup> 1927.

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example.<sup>137</sup>

This experience could so easily describe the creative process itself with the focused concentration, a ‘moment of being’ the catalyst for imaginative thought; just as Wordsworth had named his ‘spots of time,’<sup>138</sup> those moments highly charged with emotion at the time that are later recollected when the mind is still, in tranquillity.

As in most of her novels, Woolf writes about death in *To the Lighthouse*. In Part Two, ‘Time Passes,’ we learn abruptly that Mrs Ramsey has died. All that is said is written in a few sparse lines, in brackets:

[Mr Ramsey stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsey having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]<sup>139</sup>

I was interested to see if and how Woolf incorporated her still vivid childhood memory of her mother’s death,<sup>140</sup> but instead this passage is all we are given of the actual event with no emotion attached. More subtly, Mrs Ramsey is eulogised in Part One, which revolves and evolves around her, and lives on memorably in the present mind-memory of those characters that still remain in Part Three. Cleverly, Woolf has preserved a permanent image of her mother, and having ‘explained’ her feelings could then let her go in the manner of what Auden called, ‘breaking bread with the dead’.<sup>141</sup>

Her relationship with her father was less intense but troubled by what she came to call ambivalence in her harsh representation of him in her final memoirs. In the novel, as the original central character, Mr Ramsey, he was portrayed as domineering, with outbursts of temper, but also capable of great feeling and love.

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<sup>137</sup> Woolf, V., *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992) p. 85

<sup>138</sup> Wordsworth, W., see p.12, n.30 for detailed reference to ‘spots of time’.

<sup>139</sup> Woolf, V., *Ibid.* p. 175

<sup>140</sup> Note: In *Moments of Being*, Woolf writes vividly of her father coming down the corridor after her mother has just died, with his arms outstretched, distraught, brushing her aside. p. 91

<sup>141</sup> Auden, W.H., *New York Times*, August 7<sup>th</sup> 1971. Quote: ‘Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.’

As a developing poet and not a novelist, I became interested in the working practice of Virginia Woolf, noting more similarities to my own experiences in her accounts of the creative process involved in her imaginative writing than differences. The essential reading she felt necessary to nurture her soul was always present, 'I have so many books at the back of my mind,'<sup>142</sup> and she always over-optimistically planned her reading schedule, paradoxically when also trying to write a new novel.

I often find that I am inspired to write poetry following a period of intense reading, not always by the material, but because reading other poetry opens the mind to the possibilities and stretch of language, making space for the imagination to respond. After a poetry group day school,<sup>143</sup> reading and responding to poems through creative and critical discussion, I always experience a positive surge in creative output. For Virginia Woolf, a high level of external creative stimulation, through reading, socialising, writing articles, essays, reviews and conversations, was necessary to maintain her inner self and to keep the voices of her characters alive in her head, in her imaginative 'space'. Her diary entries illustrate how her mind played with ideas in constant 'streams of consciousness' until an illness or a dull patch halted the restless search.

Woolf's prose is filled with imagery and symbolism in the manner of poetry. There is light and colour in her expression, for example in her description of the sea and the garden in *To the Lighthouse*, based on her vivid childhood memories of Talland House in St Ives. It was her one 'spiritual home,' a rich source of material for which she was eternally grateful. Woolf acknowledged the debt she owed, when she wrote:

I could fill pages remembering one thing after another. All together made the summer at St Ives the best beginning to life conceivable. When they took Talland House father and mother gave us - me at any rate - what has been perennial, invaluable. [*She then adds begrudgingly*], Suppose I had only Surrey, or Sussex, or the Isle of Wight to think about when I think about my childhood.<sup>144</sup>

She could describe with some accuracy and feeling, the different flowers, 'red-hot pokers' and 'violets;' the view to the lighthouse from the garden; the exact position of the gate and its click when it opened. Even though it was later pointed out to Woolf that

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<sup>142</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p. 81 (Monday July 20<sup>th</sup> 1925)

<sup>143</sup> D.Phil. Poetry group day school (see acknowledgements)

<sup>144</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p. 128

some of her flora and fauna would probably not have survived on the Isle of Skye, accuracy like that did not particularly matter to her, the image was enough. The book contains many endings; the end of summer; the house falls into disrepair in *Time Passes*, and the family leave, following the death of Mrs Ramsey, echoing Woolf's own life trauma of not going back again on a family holiday to St Ives after her mother died, symbolising the end of a happy childhood. There are symbolic minor losses too; a brooch belonging to a guest, a lost opportunity to go to the lighthouse when it rains. An animal skull on the wall is a reminder of mortality and time passing.

In 'A Sketch of the Past,'<sup>145</sup> Woolf remembers in minute detail her experiences in St Ives fifty years earlier. The breadth and catalogue of her sense-memory is illustrated in this short extract:

Oak apples, ferns with clusters of seeds on their backs, the regatta, Charlie Pearce, the click of the garden gate, the ants swarming on the hot front door step; buying tin-tacks; sailing; the smell of Halestown Bog; splits with Cornish cream for tea in the farm house at Trevail; the floor of the sea changing colour at lessons; old Mr Wolstenholme in his beehive chair; the spotted elm leaves on the lawn; the rooks cawing as they passed over the house in the early morning; the escallonia leaves showing their grey undersides...these for some reason come uppermost...little corks that mark a sunken net.<sup>146</sup>

Woolf brought all these memories into her present consciousness and puzzled over why so much in life is forgotten and that memory is selective not arbitrary. Her philosophy of 'being', moments of intense revelation or shock that transcend the ordinary, and 'non-being,' non-eventful, everyday ordinariness, developed out of the rapture she felt when writing. Writing, 'putting it into words and making it real, making it whole', made sense of those moments of intense emotion that rendered her powerless (her mother's death for example) and by valuing these moments as revelation and inspiration for her writing, she regained control and managed her inner feelings. These moments reinforced her belief in a universal pattern:

that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of this work of art, *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is

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<sup>145</sup>Woolf, V., *Ibid.* Her essay, (p. 127-136) 'A Sketch of the Past,' gives a very thorough memory account of St Ives.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135

no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.<sup>147</sup>

In the sequence of poems, *Observations*, I was inspired to write about Virginia Woolf, not as the influential modernist writer and early feminist that she clearly was, but the personality whom I found most interesting in terms of her creativity and vision. Visiting her writing room at Monk's House, reading her letters and diaries, studying photographs and paintings, I tried to visualise her life and her relationships. I empathised with the times when her creative continuity was interrupted by illness. This led eventually to the tragic end of her life, when loss and death were too strong an enemy in the gloom following the War; 'how vanished everyone is,' she wrote to friends, and her 'method' of writing it out of her system failed her. One shock at a time she could manage but not so many, one after another, relentless. Her earlier diary entries show how on the surface of things she had previously developed a hardened skin and attitude to loss. On the death of a friend she wrote:

I do not any longer feel inclined to doff the cap at death. I like to go out of the room talking, with an unfinished sentence on my lips. That is the effect it had on me- no leave-takings, no submission, but someone stepping out into the darkness.<sup>148</sup>

All through her adult life, Leonard Woolf was her 'emotional rock,' her anchor which steadied and grounded her mercurial spirit. It is a good analogy, since Woolf was endlessly haunted by deep water imagery that re-occurred during moments of severe depression. She was constantly drawn back to the sea and waves breaking on a shore.

The first poem I wrote in this sequence, 'A map of history' (TTB: 69) was inspired by photographs of Virginia Woolf with her sister Vanessa in a garden, playing, laughing, in conversation during a stage of comparative innocence, as young women. Now, this poem seems over-formal in its layout but I wanted to capture something of the period as well as the 'moment' that was passing:

They do not stay long, these images; do not stand still  
Long enough; a hand here stroking a ribboned sash,  
an arm lifted to reassure a wide hat, in blurred motion,  
oblivious to the lengthening shadows of the trees.

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<sup>147</sup> Woolf, V., *Moments of Being*, p. 72

<sup>148</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p. 72 (Tuesday April 8<sup>th</sup> 1925)

In contrast, the photographer *will* preserve this moment. His voice ‘weaves on the backs of swallows a swelling baritone that rises and dips ahead of the arranged silence.’ This poem is quite dense in terms of both imagery and statement. If I were writing it now I might revise some of the content without losing the central theme of time passing; ‘we measure our lives in moments like these. *Blink*, and they are gone.’ The imagery of ‘lengthening shadows of the trees’ implies the darkness as well as the light which their futures would hold:

The tiny figures crawl  
across where shadows fray neat edges of the mossy lawn.  
You cannot see their upturned faces before they disappear,  
like the afternoon, swallowed by treetops and the light.

I am the observer in this poem, encouraging the reader to see what I can see and know is going to happen in a philosophical yet authoritative manner, ‘This is the perspective of history. *That* woman, *this* bird, will not come again; will not intrude upon our future.’ Each four-lined stanza is separate, but the whole poem follows the time sequence, mirroring the afternoon that is swiftly passing. I imagined firstly looking back, into the past of a photograph and then moving away into the present, hence the image of the hot-air balloon. Lastly, looking down at the changing scene once more, ‘the distance between you is a map without directions/and you would be saying, “Here is where it happens.”’

Interestingly, in terms of form, I keep the stanzas separate in this early poem rather than extend the line breaks as in the later poems. I believe that I was still counting the metre manually rather than by ear and listening for the emerging cadence.

I am naturally drawn to internal rhyme and near rhyme; often these appear as if by accident, but are what I hear in my head as I think about a phrase. In this poem for instance, ‘loveliness/dresses’, ‘own/baritone/swallow’, ‘across/moss’, ‘crawl/lawn’, and elsewhere, similar vowel sounds in words- ‘shape/swaying/arranged/again/away’, or ‘own/baritone/go’.

I have always needed to feel that a poem looks right or complete on the page; this aspect of my writing is linked to my strong sense of visual patterning and I believe my training as an artist. Ultimately though, a poem is about feelings. Had I found the

language to express the emotion of the occasion? Was the rhythm right? In my early attempts I hesitated over revision but as a more confident poet I know its value. I quickly became more objective, looking at structure, the way a poem hangs on language, hangs together. In two poems in this sequence, 'Condolences,' (TTB:73) and 'Clearance' (TTB:74) for example, I experimented with form and tried writing a sonnet, ending up with a fourteen-line poem but no rhyming pattern. Initially I believed that it suited the subject matter but after some revision I returned to a freer form and space on the page. 'Condolences,' is an attempt to express the grief of Leonard Woolf following the disappearance and suicide of his wife. Although he replied by letter to all the messages of condolences, he wrote a private note to himself. One line in particular inspired the poem; 'I know that it is the last page & yet I turn it over'.<sup>149</sup>

I wanted to capture something of the emotion of this sentence which seemed so final and yet hopeful. The human dilemma contained in this one vulnerable sentence *is* the poem. The lines preceding these words were equally moving:

I know that V will not come across the garden from the lodge, and yet I look in that direction for her. I know that she is drowned and yet I listen for her to come in at the door. I know that it is the last page and yet I turn it over. There is no limit to one's stupidity and selfishness.<sup>150</sup> (*April 1941*)

I began by imagining myself as Leonard Woolf and considered his feelings, sitting at Woolf's writing table alone, reading her last letter to him in the knowledge that she had walked alone to her death and he was unable to save her.

'After the rush and noise of grief,  
*Silence...*'

By reflecting on the tensions that this aroused in me, including personal experience of witnessing others' reactions to death, I thought of some phrases I might use in a poem. I visited her writing room at Monk's House and observed where she sat, as well as the view across the meadows to Lewes and the river beyond the house. By this time I felt a growing familiarity from reading her diaries and letters but did I know or did I imagine she predominantly used green ink, writing in longhand? Had I read that the ink often stained her fingers which were long? This is where truth and fiction overlap in a poem.

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<sup>149</sup> Woolf, L., *The Letters of Leonard Woolf*, ed. F. Spotts (Weidenfield & Nicholson 1990) p. 165

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p 165

Was my imagination interpreting the facts? As I visualised the scene, river imagery came into my mind, '*Silence* like a 'splash of water;' 'her last words 'swim through once dark spaces, blurred memory channels;' 'the green ink, smudged in places reminds him of weeds, the river's edge, this morning like no other'.

The poem has an abundance of imagery and a sense of fluidity, which is more apparent in Version Two (TTB: 73) than in the original form, reflecting the river images, Leonard Woolf's thoughts and 'her last words.' Spreading the poem out into four separate stanzas and shortening the lines, has the effect of slowing down the high emotional content the poem contains, echoing the passage of Leonard Woolf's thoughts as he gradually faces and accepts his devastating loss.

I am describing a scene within a scene, and it occurs to me that this method of 'becoming' a character is resonant of Woolf's novels. He (Leonard) sits at her table re-reading the letter in present tense then he closes his eyes, 'it brings her to him', (out of the darkness) finally, '*He is her...*', then he brings her back to her writing table and the present, 'he can see the pen, her wrist bent at the strap, time itself ticking' (implying continuity when there is none, also the fact that time was running out, reassuring time, mimicking a human heartbeat).

Now at the end of the poem, there is some ambiguity in the final lines as to who 'lifts the page for the last time.' Is it Leonard in the present or Woolf in the past? My original intention was that it was Leonard, but now I prefer to leave it for the reader to interpret for themselves. I changed the last line from 'feeling the helplessness of love' to 'and turning it over,' preferring the finality and the more masculine down to earth response as well as referring back to the original quote from Leonard Woolf that inspired the poem. The main theme of this poem is separation and loss although ultimately it is also about love.

This is a good example of how a poem can evolve over time. At last I know it is complete. I have included the original version of 'Condolences' here. Version Two is in the collection of poems (TTB: 73):



**Condolences (v.1)**

*'I know that it is the last page, and yet I turn it over'*  
 (Leonard Woolf – April 1941)

After the rush and noise of grief...Silence  
 Like a splash of water settles patiently  
 On her last words. They swim through  
 Once dark spaces, blurred memory channels  
 To reach him. Again, he searches the  
 Familiar print for meaning. The green ink  
 Smudged in places reminds him of weeds.  
 The river's edge; this morning like no other.  
 Closing his eyes brings her to him. He is her.  
 Wasted pages crumpled in his fist. Wet ink.  
 A draft as always; those long stained fingers.  
 He can see the pen, her wrist, bent at the strap,  
 Time itself ticking. Her arm resting on the table  
 He sits at now. Feeling the helplessness of love.

On revising this poem and wanting to give it more room (stanzas) to breathe, I also removed the capitalization which suited the original form. The poem as it stands in sonnet form is very compact, which reflects the 'moment in time' it represents, but there *is* a natural break between stanzas two and three when the poem changes emphasis, and the second version takes account of this. 'Closing his eyes brings her to him. *He is her...*' is such an important line in this poem, dividing the two halves, the reality of separation in the first half and the separation between reality and imagination in the second. I feel that both versions work equally well and that the merits of each provoke debate that illustrates all artistic endeavour, namely when is a work of art complete? There may yet be a third and final version of 'Condolences.'

I enjoy the sounds of the words in this poem, the careful choice of consonants, 'channels/reach; 'splash/smudged/edge/pages, echo the water imagery. Any rhymes are internal, 'green/weeds', 'again/stain' or near rhyme, 'reach/searches.'

I found it more difficult to write about Woolf herself. In 'Voices' (TTB: 70), I tried to imagine the wall of noise inside her head that drove her to end her life and the finality of leaving the house she loved. In 1919, she commented that Monk's House...will be our address forever; Indeed, I've already marked out our graves in the yard which joins

our meadow.’<sup>151</sup> And then, twenty-two years later, she walked through the water-meadows to the swollen river. Death was always on her mind and in her work, ‘I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual.’<sup>152</sup> In ‘Observations,’ I imagined the decisive moment when she chose to walk into the river, addressing myself to her as an impartial observer. Although I still appreciate the imagery in this poem, ‘stones stealing edges off each other/ in your pocket, each one chosen/ to balance your lightness, your weight,’ I feel it is the least successful poem in this sequence (for reasons noted in Chapter One) and would now like to revise it in view of my own development over the last six years.

‘Letting go,’ (TTB: 75) is the final poem in this sequence and was originally part of an earlier poem, ‘Clearance.’ (TTB: 74). I intended it to be a closure of sorts both for Leonard Woolf and for my involvement with the life of Virginia Woolf, so that I could move on to other poems. I was feeling the need to write about myself more directly as a result of expressing emotion through a ‘third person’ and I was beginning to find my own poetic voice. In ‘Letting go,’ Leonard Woolf visits the writing room in the garden at Monk’s House, where ‘Salacious spring, never lovelier, provides an early vase of daffodils.’ The poem ends with an affirmation of continuity and a memorable image of ‘life breaking in on death’:

As if to prove that this was life, the rest was history,

her walking stick, half-planted, had somehow taken root  
in the dampness, produced a leaf, an embryonic shoot.

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<sup>151</sup> Lee, H., *Virginia Woolf*, p. 421

<sup>152</sup> Woolf, V., *Diary*, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1922.

## Chapter Four

### A Matter of Words

‘Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of  
verbal imprecisions,  
Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that have taken  
the place of thoughts and feelings,  
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of  
incantation’<sup>153</sup>

T.S.Eliot

The poet is a wordsmith first and foremost. Out of the raw material of language, he or she must forge something meaningful and accessible using whatever tools are available. This is the craftsmanship involved in becoming a poet. The developing poet is the ‘apprentice’ learning the skills with which to transform ordinary everyday language into poetry. With this analogy, it is then possible to see at first-hand the making of a poet, which has been the prime focus of this study.

After a sustained period of concentration for over six years on the creative processes involved in writing poetry, in conjunction with the practical composition of an anthology of poems, I now feel more qualified to join in the debate and say, ‘I am a poet’ rather than ‘I write poetry,’ which seems in some respects less enabling. It has not been an easy journey, which makes the outcome even more of a revelation to me. In writing this preface I have had to develop an alert critical awareness and technical vocabulary in order to closely analyse my own work, as well as analyse the origins and inspiration for many of the poems. At times I have felt more akin to a scientist, an ‘ethnographer of the soul,’ in the manner in which I have explored and recorded some of my innermost thoughts and memories. It has been a totally inspiring and essential process in itself and has taught me much about my own working practice as well as that of poets and writers whose work I admire.

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<sup>153</sup> ‘Choruses from ‘The Rock’ IX, by Eliot, T.S., *Collected Poems* 1909-62 (London: Faber 1974), p.182

How has my greater understanding of the creative process informed my writing? I began at the very core of poetry by examining poetic voice, to find out how a poet develops a true and individual yet natural way of expressing their identity and voice. Several factors emerged to support the idea that the complex influence of other poetic voices (in my case Seamus Heaney first and foremost) is both common to and necessary for most poets, in conjunction with a developing craft and technique. A poet has to listen and learn to be able to gain critical awareness of what works and what doesn't. Even in poems that were written centuries ago, the voice speaks and it is unique. Finding poems I enjoy reading aloud and hearing poets themselves read their work has introduced me to a wide and diverse range of spoken poetry and made me a better poet.

Whilst listening attentively to the rhythm and phonic pattern of language at the heart of poetry, so much is stored in the unconscious; phrases, fragments of poems, lines, patterns, images, words that may be retrieved later and add to a sense of self. Our identity then, our 'self', is shaped by our life experiences and influences we can trace, as well as those that are too fragmentary in the unconscious to trace. It is where we are now, in the present. There is a core inside us that holds the truth of who we are, what we believe, our personality, 'the essential quick,' Heaney defined, that we must reach down into to successfully find a poetic voice.

Some people and I include Virginia Woolf here, although it could equally apply to many other writers and poets, suffered from a crisis of identity and frequent episodes of mental illness caused by external life factors. Yet within her innermost self she maintained and nurtured a strong poetic voice that continued to produce some of the finest and original autobiographical fiction in the twentieth century.

I have also explored 'inspiration' in relation to my poetry. What inspires a poem? What makes us 'catch a breath' and decide to write about it? Each person sees the world differently to the next. Again, this is linked to life experience but ultimately simple human emotion is at the root of how we see things and the reason why we see things *differently*. A beautiful view remains just that, if it does not make us feel more 'alive'.

I am frequently asked what inspires me to write a poem and I realised recently I instinctively and involuntarily place a hand on my heart, usually responding that I am

inspired by all kinds of things as long as they move me, tug at my emotions, make me *feel*. A very simplistic view but true I believe of most poets. It might well be a view, or a painting; equally it could be a conversation or another poem. Living in the countryside adds an extra dimension to my poetry. Subconsciously the most wonderful images are laid down in memory. To witness buzzards soaring or the particular way cherry blossom floats according to the wind or how swallows swoop silently across a field, is to notice infinite possibilities in the most fleeting of moments. I feel strongly that one of the tasks of a poet is to notice and record these small epiphanies. When recreated in a poem we acknowledge their presence like a gift.

Sometimes inspiration arises from finding out something new and making a connection, but all these are ultimately subjective experiences and entirely individual. All our experiences are stored. Those that have aroused feelings are remembered more easily, whilst those that have aroused strong or extreme emotion (on either end of the spectrum) are never forgotten, unless deliberately blocked and that is another avenue for exploration, although outside the realms of this study.<sup>154</sup> For Virginia Woolf, all experience counted and her memories seemed to be very fluid and accessible to her, so that on questioning herself whether her fiction was in fact autobiography in another name, she wrote:

Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works. I wonder, whether...I deal...in autobiography and call it fiction?<sup>155</sup>

A key theme which I have pursued during this study and one which I keep returning to is the role that memory plays in the poetic transformation of experience into language. This retrieval of past experience especially in relation to childhood memory features strongly in the work of both Seamus Heaney and Virginia Woolf. It is a quality in their respective genres of poetry and fiction that I feel drawn to and is a feature of many poems in the collection 'Telling the Bees.' In autobiographical essays, both Heaney and Woolf have described their childhood experiences in vivid detail. This has been an

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<sup>154</sup> For further reading, see *Acquainted with the Night, Psychoanalysis & the Poetic Imagination*, ed. H. Canham., & C. Satyamurti., (London: Karnac 2003)

<sup>155</sup> Gordon, L., *A Writer's Life* (Oxford University Press 1984) p. 6

invaluable source of material to illustrate the impact of recollection as central to the creative process. Both have noted that one exciting and creative aspect of working with memory is its unpredictability, since one avenue of thought leads to another.

A.S. Byatt writes:

Memory is not quite the same thing as consciousness, but they are intricately, toughly and delicately intertwined. Someone once said that we consist of the pure theoretical instant of awareness, and everything else is already memory.<sup>156</sup>

Childhood experiences can provide an almost infinite source of material for a writer. In fact the tongue-in-cheek comment has been made, ‘When a poet runs out of childhood, what do you do?’<sup>157</sup> Why do we choose to write about ourselves? Paul John Eakin has written extensively about autobiographical material in life stories. He quotes John Updike’s definition of autobiographical writing, ‘as a way of coping with the otherwise unbearable knowledge that we age and leave behind this litter of dead unrecoverable selves.’<sup>158</sup> Paul John Eakin suggests that we do not exist in isolation and that autobiographical material is relational; that our identity is always defined in relation to another person and our story is linked to that of someone else. He mistrusts the ‘I’ speaking in the present tense as being continuous with the ‘I’ speaking in the past because, ‘it masks the disruptions of identity produced by passing time and memory’s limitations.’<sup>159</sup> Invariably, our memories *are* linked to someone else, a significant other person/s whom we remember by way of the association. Virginia Woolf connected her earliest memories to her mother; Seamus Heaney attached his memories to his immediate family and homeland. Both these writers retained very strong visual and sensual images of their respective childhoods, especially a sense of place and belonging. I suggest that although there are obvious limitations in memory which we compensate for in creating fictional components, we have to look beyond this and take a poem on trust, believing the truthfulness and integrity of the poetic voice.

Seamus Heaney continues to weave a web of complex memories in his most recent collection of poems, *Human Chain*.<sup>160</sup> In this work, one memory leads onto another in

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<sup>156</sup> Byatt, A.S., ‘Introduction’, p. xii, *Memory, An Anthology*.

<sup>157</sup> Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan., Interview, RTE, Radio 1 (March 1999).

<sup>158</sup> Eakin, John P., *How our Lives become Stories: Making Selves* (Cornell University Press:1999) p. 93

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93

<sup>160</sup> Heaney, S., *Human Chain*

an echo of how the mind works and plays naturally with memories. He now muses on the ageing process and forgetfulness, questioning the inevitable diminishment of poetic power. The poem, 'The Baler',<sup>161</sup> is reminiscent of earlier themes and is nostalgic for 'summer's richest hours/As they had been to begin with/Fork-lifted, sweated through.' This warm recollection suddenly includes a more recent memory of a family friend, 'what I also remembered...' 'Was Derek Hill's saying/The last time he sat at our table/He could no longer bear to watch/The sun going down/And asking please to be put/With his back to the window.'

Many of these later poems contain oblique references to his earlier work, picking up the threads of other familiar poems, such as blackberry-picking, the ominous rat-hole, the vegetation, and he states, 'I had my existence. I was there/ Me in place and the place in me.'<sup>162</sup> In the same poem, 'A Herbal', he asks movingly:

Where can it be found again,  
An elsewhere world, beyond

Maps and atlases,  
Where all is woven into

And of itself, like a nest  
Of crosshatched grass blades ?

Mary Warnock describes memory as integral to the creative process, for inspiration, imagery and language. Our memories are woven into our sense of self as much as our experiences and our imagination which illuminates those experiences to share with others. She writes:

For because what we grasp is the past, and yet our knowledge and deep happiness are part of the present, we have found a way to overcome the gap between past and present. We have achieved a universal and timeless understanding of what things were like. And with this comes the hope, though no more than this, that the truth of how things were/are can be shared.<sup>163</sup>

When organising the shape of the collection of poems, I reflected on how much I had relied on memory and autobiographical material in the content. I chose the sequence of

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>163</sup> Warnock, M., 'Memory into Art,' *Memory* (London: Faber 1987), p. 94

Moon poems, ‘A Moon Calendar,’ to analyse, and was surprised to find how many references I had made either obliquely or directly to memories, in poems ostensibly about the names for each full moon. As I wrote these over a period of time, it had not been as obvious during the writing process for each poem. One poem in particular ‘August’ (TTB: 100) was about the Sturgeon moon (Native American origin) and might have proved challenging were it not for a childhood memory during a visit to my grandparents, that the word ‘sturgeon’ unlocked. I remembered seeing a huge fish preserved in a Victorian glass case, as the last sturgeon caught in the River Wye, possibly the last in England. Instantly, as soon as I had this thought, I was physically inside a small dark room with the shining fearsome fish, thinking how well it suited its name. I started to write:

The scales of the enormous sturgeon gleamed ochre, with age  
and preservation; its whiskers probing the boundaries  
of the museum case, as if still searching the riverbed for clues.

I started to describe the fish in more detail, but in the mysterious way that memory works by association, I was standing next to my mother, who then entered the poem:

A child, I stared into its great glass eye, but saw only this:  
a golden orb of deep shadows, diffused sunlight filtering  
through the river surface, mayflies rising to the heat

of an unusual summer that brought many surprises; not least  
this prehistoric fish caught in the brindled shallows of lives  
a hundred years before you were a mother or I your daughter.

What began as a childhood memory then changes to the present tense:

Years later, this memory resurfaces; you are holding my hand.  
I am a child again, the unspoken hurt of illness in your eyes,  
reflects nothing but confusion – deep shadows on the water.

In the final couplet, the moon which was the original subject of the poem finally makes an appearance:

Tonight, the full moon floats in a river of blue-green sky;  
a great fish-eye of a moon yellowed by the last curl of sun.

I have chosen to highlight this poem in this chapter since it illustrates how a poem may originally begin with a single image that is either altered or extended through associated



thoughts or a memory. This poem worked backwards from the final line (above) that arose from observations of a moon coloured by a setting sun. The image of the fish-eye then linked with the idea of a 'sturgeon moon' which prompted my childhood memory. I remembered staring into the 'great glass eye' and feeling afraid, holding onto my mother's hand. This memory image was significant; the moment of fear and certainly wonder, was outside the ordinariness of everyday life, a '*moment of being*'. Re-visiting childhood through memory is one way of reconnecting with the child's trust in reality and trust in imagination, both requisite attributes for a poet or artist in adulthood. We need imagination to survive and grow.

My experience of writing the poems in *Telling the Bees*, has shown me at first-hand the central role memory plays in the creative process of 'making a poem'. As a tool, as source material it is invaluable, yet to describe it merely as such denies it some of the mystery surrounding the origins of a poem. As a catalyst for the poetic imagination it is extraordinary. But memories by themselves are not enough to create the necessary energy for a poem. The crucial engagement is between outer *and* inner experience. The imagination works as well with memory as it works on experiences, ideas, feelings and images in the present. The poetic imagination transforms these elements into a language that can be shared and understood. So for example in Heaney's poem, 'Personal Helicon',<sup>164</sup> quoted in Chapter One, he writes about his childhood experience of looking into wells and buckets, 'I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells/of waterweed, fungus and damp moss.' There were other less pleasurable feelings too, 'And one was scare-some, for there out of ferns and tall/ foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.' Heaney retrieves these memories and brings them up metaphorically out of the wells, the depths of childhood into his present consciousness and ours too. Now as an adult, it would be 'beneath all adult dignity' but poetry (rhyme) will fulfil the function of allowing him to know himself more fully as well as revealing the darker recesses of his mind.

This poem is rich in imagery, metaphor and symbolism and illustrates how the poetic imagination works to create a new perspective on the simple idea of looking into a well. It unlocks memories, transforming them into poetic language which is where Chapter Four began.

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<sup>164</sup> Heaney, S., *Death of a Naturalist*, p. 57. 'Personal Helicon' means the source of poetic inspiration.

I have chosen to end this preface with reflections on language and words which are the raw materials of the poet. In my own journey through the creative process of writing poetry, finding the poetic language adequate to what I want to say has frequently proved to be the most exacting and exciting aspect of all. I don't believe I am unique. Most poets admit that there is a struggle involved in finding the best words possible. For a developing poet there are many pitfalls and many 'practice' poems that have to be uncomfortably discussed with others in the search for the one 'good' poem and the feeling of 'Yes, this is it! In the beginning, the apprentice poet only has himself/herself, and the influential role-models, those important 'voices' looking over a shoulder. We need the approval of others, preferably other poets whom we respect, to show us the way.

I know now that I write intuitively in the first instance, after hearing the language in words or short phrases that become the central cadence or musical thread to begin a poem. The language often arrives by itself and is the result of 'allowing that first stirring of the mind around a word or an image or a memory to grow towards articulation.'<sup>165</sup> I experiment with the sounds of the words in my head, although I am not consciously aware of the form they will take on the page, nor am I at this stage considering rhythm or metre in a formal sense. Often the one good line that appears at this stage makes it into the final poem. For example, in 'Telling the Bees,' (TTB: 76) the final line, 'Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night,' was only slightly altered throughout several later revisions. It is hard to 'let go' of the words that form the root of a poem, that were there at the beginning and for this reason I find revision a difficult and somewhat destructive but necessary process.

Most of my poems have undergone a revision as I have searched for the perfect word or phrase, or following a poetry day school, reconsidered a response or suggestion from poets I respect. Some poems have arrived almost fully formed. It is interesting now to be able to identify much more easily *exactly* when a poem is finished or find the exact word or rhyme suddenly falls into place and none other will be considered. Crafting a poem or 'making' a poem that works is where the creative process for me is at its greatest intensity and I need utmost concentration of the imagination at this stage. The

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<sup>165</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 48

tension and delicate balance necessary between recollection of the original experience, image or idea, and language, requires a space for the imagination to work and play with words, with all their imprecision and multiple meanings. The mood of the writer is also an important factor, as Virginia Woolf noted in her diary:

It is now after dinner, our first summertime night, and the mood for writing has left me, only just brushed me and left me. I have not achieved my sacred half-hour yet.<sup>166</sup>

The following day, her mood changed to euphoria, when she believed she had at last found her own voice:

I have never felt this rush and urgency before. I believe I can write much more quickly; if writing it is – this dash at the paper of a phrase, and then the typing and re-typing – trying it over; the actual writing being now like the sweep of a brush; I fill it up afterwards.<sup>167</sup>

For a poet, the words are specific to the poem. They exist, with *that* particular meaning and as the poet intends for the singular purpose of conveyance of expression. They are also as Heaney notes, ‘bearers of history and mystery,’<sup>168</sup> that is they carry a weight. One of the main challenges facing the poet writing today is to find the language to say something new and meaningful out of a contemporary, fluid and constantly changing linguistic culture and to be experimental, take risks. As T.S. Eliot noted in the poem quoted at the start of this chapter, something beautiful must be wrought from ‘the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions.’ His personal struggle with words is well documented in his poetry:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.<sup>169</sup>

Although words alone are an imperfect medium with which to work, a developing poet also has the form of a poem as a structure or scaffold to support the language choices.

<sup>166</sup> Woolf, V., *A Writer's Diary*, p. 73 (Sunday April 19<sup>th</sup> 1925)

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74 (Monday April 20<sup>th</sup> 1925)

<sup>168</sup> Heaney, S., *Preoccupations*, p. 45

<sup>169</sup> From ‘Burnt Norton,’ by Eliot, T.S., *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, Faber : 1974), p. 194

My poems frequently have a structure of their own that does not comply with any formal rule of verse. This is an area I am aware of and one I am keen to explore further. I have written near sonnets, experimented with matching the form and content in different stanza variations and return frequently to using between two and four lines. I hesitate to call my style ‘free’ verse and yet it does not conform to any other interpretation except occasionally blank verse, when an approximate iambic metre is used. The arrangement of the words on the page is largely governed by the cadence and energy of the poem itself. The unusual juxtaposition of words and their meanings excites me, as does the use of metaphorical language to convey an image. I use many variations of internal rhymes, especially half-rhymes and sight rhymes. What is apparent is how similar many of my poems look on the page, as well as sound, which I can now relate to my natural speaking voice. In trying to change the even, measured style, I find I lose something of myself in the subsequent reading. I often use enjambment between one stanza and the next, enjoying the continuous line and have studied my line-breaks assiduously to make this work. In terms of future development as a poet, the balance of my line lengths and use of metre, as well as detailed pausing through punctuation, will continue to have a strong focus. I want to be able to express in the very best way possible, my inspiration and ideas, spending longer on the exact form and language of each poem, rather than rely on an individual default model that comes easily and naturally. As the epigraph states at the beginning of this chapter, ‘There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation’ out of the struggle with individual words, letters and sounds, that are all a poet has to work with.

In the title poem of the collection of poems ‘Telling the Bees,’ which I have previously discussed in relation to its origins,<sup>170</sup> I struggled for a long time to find the language adequate enough to express what I really wanted to say, at a crucial point in the poem. For this reason the poem was only completed relatively recently. It is a good working example of how a poem develops through the drafting process, with many re-workings and amendments until I knew the middle of the poem was strong enough to support the contained emotion. I decided to include these working drafts in the appendix to demonstrate in a more transparent way how an individual poem evolves.

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<sup>170</sup> Note: For further discussion, refer to Chapter One, p. 14

Writing the poems in this collection and discovering more about the way in which I work as a poet has been an invaluable exercise as well as a personal challenge. I have been fortunate to have a sustained period of apprenticeship during which I have learnt much about poetry, the creative process and myself. It has been a journey of self-development, and finally has shown me that a poet never truly ‘arrives’ in the sense of being complete. There is no end to the journey while a poet is alive. It is the nature of poetry that it will always involve a quest for the next, most perfect word or phrase or image to create something ‘extraordinary’ out of the most ‘ordinary’ human experience. As George Eliot wrote with such perspicuity:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.<sup>171</sup>

The restless search for the vision and language to express the inexpressible is infinite.

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<sup>171</sup> Eliot, G., *Middlemarch* (1872) (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd 1957 ), p. 189

# Telling the Bees

A Collection of Poems

# 1: Observations

*In that deep centre, in that black heart...*

*There would the dead leaf fall, on the water. Should I mind not again to see may tree or nut tree? Not again to hear on the trembling spray, the thrush sing, or to see, dipping and diving as if he skimmed the waves in the air, the yellow woodpecker?...*

Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941

## A map of history

If I think of them now, the garden takes shape  
 With their loveliness, borrowing the background  
 As a screen to offset their softened features and  
 Fine muslin dresses, swaying in a capricious breeze.

They do not stay long, these images, do not stand still  
 Long enough; a hand here stroking a ribboned-sash,  
 An arm lifted to reassure a wide hat, in blurred motion,  
 Oblivious to the lengthening shadows of the trees.

Sound travels furthest; their laughter carries upward  
 With a mind of its own. The photographer's voice  
 Weaves on the backs of swallows a swelling baritone  
 That rises and dips, ahead of an arranged silence.

If you have travelled in a balloon, you will know silence.  
 Imagine moving up, away from this scene. Look down.  
 The distance between you is a map without directions.  
 And you would be saying, '*Here* is where it happens'.

We measure our lives in moments like these. Blink,  
 And they are gone. This is the perspective of history.  
*That* woman, *this* bird moving effortlessly below us,  
 Will not come again, will not intrude upon our future.

Already it is time to go inside. Tiny figures crawl across  
 Where shadows fray neat edges of the mossy lawn.  
 You cannot see their upturned faces before they disappear,  
 Like the afternoon, swallowed by treetops and the light.

*The two young women, wearing their white muslin, with grass-green ribands around  
 their slim waists.....spoke for summer dawns and cloudless skies\**

\*Extract from *Bloomsbury – A House of Lions*, Leon Edel



## Voices

There is no silence now, no space to breathe.  
In between murmurs, I hear the distant sea...

One voice is low, much deeper than the rest.  
It cuts through conversation, ebbs and flows.  
*How deep it is...Let me watch the wave rise.*  
Drown out the children and the wild bird cries.

Outside, the drip and swing of early catkins,  
Swell of the river, rising to meet me, singing.

*I am certain now that I am going mad again. It is just as it was the first time, I am always hearing voices, and I know I shan't get over it now.*

Letter to Vanessa Bell (March 1941)

## Observations

Early springtime –  
 flood water, high banked,  
 distresses the edges of the river.  
 Curious swans stretch necks,  
 dipping in and out of the kale-field,  
 sidestep your gaze.

*Silence...*

Disturbed by waterlogged steps  
 and stones,  
 stealing edges off each other  
 in your pocket, each one chosen  
 to balance your lightness,  
 your weight.

Waiting for you to swim  
 would have seemed more ordinary.  
 You chose instead to walk  
 and keep on walking-  
 under the greasy surface-  
 to disappear from view.

*Sinking...*

Into yourself, imagined as this grey water.  
 How else could you have felt?  
 Last of all, your eyes, scanning briefly  
 the day it was going to be.  
 The Downs cleansed in early light.  
 Silver - that peculiar blue haze - green.

*And then the dark.*

## River Song

Ancient now,  
 wiser than valleys and hills,  
 more enduring  
 than the scattered rocks  
 spilling over themselves to be somewhere  
 still and quiet.  
*Your soul sings a river song.*

A requiem.  
 Rooted in wet earth,  
 sprung from damp imaginings,  
 a birth, awakening, a death.  
 Leaving behind the imprint of your heel  
 like a promise  
*for us to find and marvel at.*

Intransigent,  
 as the hope folded in the blanket  
 someone held,  
 impossibly blue and small and new,  
 in case you were found downstream-  
 undrowned or drowned,  
*Ophelia, with flowers in your hair.*

It is easy to imagine  
 a summer's day and you swimming  
 upstream against the current.  
 Strong brown arms grazing the steely water,  
 a new voice singing in amazement  
 of a journey to the sea.  
*You hadn't meant to travel quite so far.*

Becoming a dream,  
 you are somewhere between here and there.  
 In the pause between sound and silence  
 when the orchestra has finished playing.  
 No space to breathe if breath is all it takes,  
 no waking only sleep  
*I sleep but my heart is awake*

River, sing a different song,  
 Make it a lullaby and long.

## Condolences

*'I know that it is the last page and yet I turn it over.'*

(Leonard Woolf April 1941)

After the rush and noise of grief,  
*Silence...*  
 like a splash of water  
 settles patiently on her last words.  
 They swim through once dark spaces,  
 blurred memory channels  
 to reach him.

Again and again,  
 he searches the familiar print  
 for meaning. The green ink,  
 smudged in places reminds him of weeds,  
 the river's edge, this morning like no other.

Closing his eyes brings her to him.

*He is her...*

Wasted pages crumpled in his fist,  
 wet ink, a draft as always,  
 those long stained fingers.

He can see the pen, her wrist bent at the strap,  
 time itself ticking.  
 Her arm resting on the table he sits at now,  
 lifting the page for the last time  
 and turning it over.

## Clearance

Her dress, leaf-green and surprisingly fresh,  
hangs in spaces he wants his thoughts to go.

Somewhere ink-dark – small - incomparably safe.  
It isn't the largeness of death that occupies him,

but tiny reminders, accidental details that one day  
will snag his breath. Not the emerald glass beads

she held up to the light once to dazzle him, but  
a thin loop of her escaped hair caught in the clasp.

## Letting go

All his life, holding on tightly, afraid of letting go  
those things he loved most; and now this morning,

her absence brings him here, to where the garden  
wraps itself around her writing room. Salacious spring,

never lovelier, provides an early vase of daffodils.  
As if to prove that *this* was life, the rest was history,

her walking stick, half-planted, had somehow taken root  
in the dampness - produced a leaf - an embryonic shoot.

## 2: Telling the Bees

*'Bees were notified of all births, marriages and deaths in a family, because people believed that unless this was done, the bees would either die or fly away'*

*Tales of Old Sussex*

Telling the bees was easy - the simplest part  
After the swarm of news that broke her heart.

## Telling the Bees

News travelled more slowly then; had its own momentum,  
a gathering storm as it passed through cities, towns, villages,

just as a single horseman might once have warned of danger,  
glancing over his shoulder, a growing urgency behind him,

a disturbance in the air, a brooding cloud of unease, a swarm.

She said she sensed something wrong when the clock stopped.  
Before that the dead pigeon on the roof was a clue, its feathers

sticking to the window-glass, each gust of wind finding more.  
She began to look for signs herself, a heron blown off course,

the screech owl nearby. She greeted magpies like old friends,  
saw endings not beginnings, imagined the plumb-line to loss,

the weight of his absence, long before language named it.

What surprised her was the way the sun exploded from nowhere  
and her mouth stayed open to catch it, stayed open to swallow

the words that were left unsaid; those she would later whisper  
to the bees, to muffle their grief and smooth their angry voices.

Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night.



## The Beekeeper

At weekends, he pretended to hang his own skin  
behind the kitchen door. *No use with bees*,  
he'd tease and disappear. For years we'd lose  
him then; on still summer days a shadow figure  
magnified on the whitewashed wall was all we knew.

But as we grew, we learned more of his magic.  
Followed unbidden the curls of acrid smoke  
to watch, open-mouthed as he calmed the fizzing bees  
to a gentle hum, raising the domed roof of the lid.  
Inching forward we hid and held our breath.

Years later, visiting him, only a short walk from death,  
his ill-fitting paper-thin fingers holding mine,  
I remember how he had looked back then, as  
turning, he held out a gloved hand covered with bees  
for us to see something of the tenacity of love.

His hands danced in and out of shadow  
in the dappled light, under the trees, working  
an invisible alchemy of their own.

## Cousin Tom

*Killed by a German sniper - November 1918*

Pass quickly over the blood-stained pages of his story  
in case he wakes, startled by our faces, hands searching  
pockets for the olive-wood bible - it's comforting words

half-hidden by flowers he had borrowed from the garden,  
one last time when a hopeful sun dazzled his choices.  
Viola, pansy, heart's ease, *'my thoughts are with you'*.

Turn back, before the sniper knew him in his sights.  
November dusk fell early, inhaling lives like smoke from  
a first cigarette - that pinprick of doubt - that lost breath.

## Tracing the Past

*Holme Lacy Churchyard, Herefordshire*

A strange feeling this, to know he walked here, where we stand  
on the overgrown flagstones - cow-parsley, daisies, wild flowers

crowning the bones of those who sleep, undisturbed by ancient  
summer rain and birdsong. Even headstones lose their memory.

*Here*, his feet added daily to the worn-down step; *there* is where  
he knelt in the shade to pray. Now he rests, while day after day,

an indifferent sun measures long uneven shadows on a wall.

At night, owls call shamelessly across the silence between us.

## Legacy

*Touch wood* became a catch-phrase in our house.  
When luck appeared to slip away like salt, we knew

to keep our fingers crossed; a bargain made with fate,  
rather than trust the randomness of prayer. Silence

descended layer by layer on risks we might have taken  
had we disbelieved each other. That the hapless dove

landing on the roof to preen itself, was *not* an omen;  
the bomb will be elsewhere, and everybody safe.

You left us with your silences intact; your lucky touch.  
We love - and yet we dare not love too much.

## New Year

### *Hogmanay*

A foot in the door at midnight spelt the best luck ever.  
Whether you believed in magic or the turning of the year,

our father was made for it, with his darkness, his height,  
a wild Celtic charm none of us could keep forever.

I remember one night, the knock three times at the door  
that woke us out of the bitter cold he lit a match to;

standing in the doorway, filling it with his shape, the sky  
just visible, a star sitting on his shoulder, coal in his hand.

Half-asleep, we saw his glittering eyes take in the stairs  
where we hid, the shabby hallway, its swinging light;

our mother, her face illuminated, bright as a sixpence,  
with no way of telling what she *really* wished for.

## Cultural Heritage

At the Old Tenement House I searched everywhere  
for you and found instead my Scottish grandmother,  
stooped over a range as blue-black as her hair.

Her long serious face spoke for those women better  
than any guidebook; hiding indignity and shame  
in the curtained space of the box-bed – head to toe

in row after row of grimy terraces, the children slept  
between thin layers, packed in like apples for the winter.

Photographs in the gift shop; pinched, unholy ghosts  
of boys like you, who didn't run away to sea, but stayed.  
Glaswegian faces, made to measure in this austere city,

shaped by the steely gaze of its most famous fathers.  
I had given you up for lost, until the last bus out of town  
coughed up a woman who might have been related;

her voice, loosened by something like whisky or desire,  
an accent I half knew – broad – uncompromising – yours.

## Visiting Northumberland

I am thankful my father never shrank to fit the hollows  
my mind reserved for him, for later, when he grew old,

or entered a honey-comb world of muddled strangers,  
where he might forget himself, diminished and unlovely.

He remains a giant striding the vast beach of memory,  
long legs in rolled-up trousers - paddling the sand banks,

holding hands, when I did not reach as far as his knees.

Here, is where he was scattered into unforgiving winds,  
competing with the ragged gull-shrieks for my attention.

The words I would ask him now, blown out of my mouth  
beyond the benign harbour, far away from the sea-houses

he visited in another man's skin. Here, where he grew small  
and disappeared; becoming at last a creature of the elements,

as light in the air as feathers, dust, the bones that carry flight.

## **This old photograph**

Is the one I like the best, the one I think is true  
of my parents, before they married and grew into  
the people they had become when I knew them;

more ordinary than hopeful, weighed down by life,  
so that their leaning apart was something natural,  
something they might have expected to happen.

Here they are now, looking straight at the camera.  
Their young lives ready to begin after the war,  
happy, optimistic, shyly pleased with themselves.

His arm round her waist, her eyes on the future  
they imagine as blameless, a bright new world.  
And all of it waiting to happen, waiting to begin.



## **This May Morning**

My mother is mouthing an answer but no sound comes  
to question the darkness she is slowly becoming.

Blossom outside the window settles,  
weightless as our words that cannot find her.

Silence is better, softly falling round our shoulders,  
dropping onto the covers like tears, petals, snow.

Enough to know as lovers do, who share silence  
easily, that this moment will pass, become memory.

Instead I stroke her hair; suddenly that small child,  
bare-legged, climbing tall stairs while she waits patiently.

I am in her place, wherever that is; soon she will know  
how infinitely the drifting blossom resembles snow.

## Ghosts

It is always a summer's day, in early August.  
One of those rare days when the sun drips  
off the leaf-heavy trees overhanging the lane.

I see you walking, ahead of me, two slim figures  
side by side, silhouetted in the brightness.  
I call to you, want you to turn-

I want to tell you, *It's alright,*  
*Everything has turned out alright-*  
*I forgive you.*

But you keep on walking towards the sun.  
Beneath the cathedral of branches, a filtered light  
splashes the poplar leaves. They dazzle and shine.

I want to say *Look at me and you will see*  
*the best and worst of yourselves.*

I know your steps so well by now;  
the shadows between us growing shorter.  
My footprint fits into the silence you leave behind.

I want to call out *Wait! Look, here I am!*  
Make you stand still, long enough to listen, turn,  
I want to see the look of surprise on your faces.

## Remembrance

In November came the urge to plant brightness,  
press bare hands to the delicate papery touch;  
fat bulbs laid out in rows on the uneven mound.

Peeling back edges of the raw turf just enough,  
revealed dark spoil - hopeful spasms of life,  
and leaf-mould in handfuls, shiny black leaves.

I remember your digging, rhythmic, measured  
in shallow breaths that stammered into nowhere;  
swallowing the taste of decay, damp remainders.

The still autumn air heavy with endings,  
and us, frail undertakers, bending and stooping  
between the stones, as if we belonged there

in that churchyard, part of a ritual, thinking of  
a summer's day, the untidy commotion of death,  
the way the birds suddenly stopped singing.

And now, renewal, each bulb promising yellow,  
leaf after leaf, flower on flower, an early spring.  
After the end of winter - a pause in remembering.

## Finding Amber

Deaf to our footfalls, voices calling,  
she plays *almost dead* to perfection.  
Under the monbretia, sun-lit bird-song  
falls short of her brindled face.

Our hands search for her shadow.

An umbrella of leaves filters breath  
to a whisper so slight,  
her whiskers twitch as we lift her,  
haloed by orange spears, nettles

into the day she is leaving.

No time to grieve, we cradle a skin  
no longer imagined as hers.  
A limp body remembers another  
it possessed once,

lithe, eye-bright and dangerous.

We will bury her here,  
where the sunlight is strongest.  
Flowers will grow into her memory.  
Tomorrow, many wings will unfold,

rehearse a new journey without her.

## **Naming the Fields**

*In Memory, Terry Williams (1921-1999) Countryman and farmer*

There are those who tread so lightly on the earth,  
by chance or destiny, their footprints disappear.  
A dragonfly hovers, impatient, is gone into its winter.

Not you; you could name the fields we walked through,  
knew by heart the contours of the land, its story,  
each step measured, leaving an imprint, your own song.

A thousand years ago might have seen you striding  
across these meadows, shaping rough paces. A gift,  
lifting you out of the ordinary. Horizonsing the sky;

*Hook Pasture, Fox-earth, Little Slugg's Eye.*

**He is the weather now**

His favourite old dog, down at heel, steals sly glances  
at the chair in the corner, sniffs the air, willing him back

where he belongs; sensing a new difference but unaware  
he has become this fine evening; is out walking the fields

that have almost forgotten the lopsided tread of his steps.  
The herd graze, reassured he is passing among them,

at one with the day, the river, the green acres he is leaving.  
Fine mist shrouding the brook land will last until dawn

and will nudge the cattle awake with his familiar hands.

## One afternoon

*1937. Haymaking in the Seven Acre Brook Field, Little Buckham Farm, East Sussex*

She stands, your grandmother, brushes crumbs from her skirts,  
steps backwards to take in the tractor and the horse, dwarfed  
by towering hay-waggons, more than the carts can hold, it seems.

Soon they will make their slow procession over the mown ground,  
but now the pause for tea. Holding the camera steady, she sees it all:  
your father, the boy he was, the baby looking away over a shoulder

at the passing train. The photograph will capture something of it:  
a summer's day, one afternoon, at the edge of comfortable memory  
before it becomes history - an empty field, a brook, seven clean acres.

## Where the heart is

Cupped in your hand, the newt stiffens, feigns death.  
Disturbed from a long sleep, sips a silent, icy breath.

Although these grave-stones are capped with snow,  
you name each one we pass. That boy from school,

who never grew old, the man who lost his memory.  
Here, where snowfall numbs the ground, lies

the woman who kept a goose; in the next row  
the builder and his wife, the postmistress – all here

in this place together, a village that can't be seen.  
And closer still, your grandmother, father, mother.

Under these layers of earth, lie those whose sleep  
will never be broken, so endless it is, and deep.



### 3. A Moon Calendar

*One legend connected with the moon was that there was treasured everything wasted on earth, such as misspent time and wealth, broken vows, unanswered prayers, fruitless tears and unfulfilled desires.*

*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable, 1870 (article on 'Moon')*

## January

### *Wolf-Moon*

Our ancestors named it *Wolf Moon*.  
Though there are no wolves here, running the fields,

I imagine their thick coats crisp with frost,  
voices keen as glass, razor-sharp with hunger,

calling for the moon to show her true colours.  
Coming closer, their warm breath punches the air,

the stench of blood on whisker and jaw, a blur  
of yellow eyes and teeth against the white ground.

Stories from another time and place, when *home*  
was a struggle through a dense forest of words

naming the menace behind every tree and stranger.  
A hood for a face and only the moon for company.

As dark as a wolf's mouth, this night of fairy-tale fear.  
The sleeping earth wakes to the footfall of thieves.

## February

### *Snow Moon*

A watery moon blinks through storm clouds,  
eyeing the white ground with suspicion.

A sign that winter is passing,  
as surely as the swallows, still a world away,  
watch the shadows lengthen,

swarm in a tepid sky,  
grow sleek, remember distance.

Inside the hive - silence.  
A furry mass of bodies - tiny throb of stilled life,  
the temperature of mid-summer.

## March

### *Worm Moon*

Spring and the worms stir  
deep in the pock-marked ground,  
drawn by invisible threads  
of warmth and light.

Lie dormant under the thin veneer  
between soil and sky.

Our faces in the moonlight, the same  
but somehow changed;  
the way that spring arrives-  
leaf by leaf unfolds itself  
and the world shifts sideways,  
woken from a trance.

Walking across the fields after rain,  
we hear the earth breathing,  
imagine watery channels, stretch-marks  
yawning.

A thousand worms  
are turning in their sleep.

## April

### *Seed Moon*

A growing moon tonight, turning the cherry trees  
in bloom, into umbrellas of fine, embroidered lace.

You can't capture it, have to believe it will outlast  
a late frost or the smallest breeze, sending showers

of blossom sideways in the air. It is not native here,  
needs stillness, contemplation, a Japanese garden.

Sometimes a miracle *can* happen. When scientists  
found the carcass of a woolly mammoth in the ice,

they discovered a last supper of grains and seeds,  
which planted, grew into wildflowers and weeds.

## May

### *Flower moon*

Standing on the porch tonight, the full moon rising  
over the wildness of the garden, over the night flowers

releasing their scent; honeysuckle, jasmine, lavender,  
I breathe in a memory of you, in a different garden

far from today, alive to an evening like this.  
Naming each plant you touch, letting your fingers

trail across drowsing petals, gathering dew  
under the same moon that rouses moths from sleep.

Nothing is wasted; the moon shares our memories,  
quietly eavesdrops on the language of the stars

scribbled across an ancient sky, and like a phantom  
in a photograph, lit by a strange and borrowed glow,

keeps a solitary distance; there are no words for this  
parallel existence, only a cool white spillage of light.

## June

### *Honey Moon*

His skill, the art of centuries; behind him a Mexican wave  
of bees pay no respect to the gods of the cliff-top; he hangs  
and prays alone – that the full moon will guide his passage

to where the honey lies. Only a makeshift rope to hold him:  
the last of the season's flowers crown his head  
as he climbs into the sky. Away from the crowd beneath

he breathes in silence, as his ancestors did, to hear the roar  
of heart-beat echo in his ears. The bees begin to dance  
in his mind's eye. His chance to prove himself a man,

a honey-gatherer; the wild honey-comb fizzing with bees,  
he must plunge his bare arm deep into the angry nest.  
Level now with the moon, he is homesick for the earth below,

the cool caves, where his ancestors imagined him in charcoal.  
In the stretch of his hand, in his bones he carries the memory;  
one arm anchored to the rock-face, the bees a vivid stripe of rain.

## July

### *Buck Moon*

Not one but two owls call from deep inside the wood.  
Nightfall names this moment, a tangible winding down,

when darkness drips slowly, like sealing wax on stone.  
If you listen, you can hear the last bird singing the round

just as an owl signs off the night moments before dawn.  
In caves at Lascaux, the oldest lunar calendar survives

history; hidden undiscovered for thousands of years,  
it tells something of ourselves we have lost; a longing

to know *what* is important: not the whole sky but the moon,  
its rise and fall, the graceful ballet of the antlered deer.



## August

### *Sturgeon Moon*

The scales of the enormous sturgeon gleamed ochre, with age and preservation, its whiskers probing the boundaries of the museum case, as if still searching the riverbed for clues.

A child, I stared into its great glass eye, but saw only this:  
a golden orb of deep shadows, diffused sunlight filtering  
through the river surface, mayflies rising to the heat

of an unusual summer that brought many surprises; not least  
this prehistoric fish caught in the brindled shallows of lives  
a hundred years before you were a mother or I your daughter.

Years later, this memory resurfaces; you are holding my hand.  
I am a child again, the unspoken hurt of illness in your eyes  
reflects nothing but confusion - deep shadows on the water.

Tonight, the full moon floats in a river of blue-green sky;  
a great fish-eye of a moon yellowed by the last curl of sun.

## September

### *Harvest Moon*

Between seasons, twilight and night, the harvest moon hangs heavy;  
a slow-ripening plum remembering the blush of lost summer heat.

Cooling air over the cornfield is charged with energy - the day's promise.  
Now if we look closely, there are shapes within shapes - the cut wheat

leans in neat stacks towards the evening star. A lone figure and his dog  
head home, follow the moon's compass, unusually bright, full and low.

Behind him are shadows – the faint pencil figures of phantom workers,  
gleaners bent low over the stubble, lifting and re-lifting history.

I think of your father, and flesh him out again, face flushed at the end  
of a burnt day, walking the field-edge with his dogs, a late observance.

Perfect art of watchful presence; the moon sees what the heart imagines.

After '*Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star*' by Samuel Palmer (c1830)

## October

### *Hunter's Moon*

In a city, far from here, you see the same moon  
-a blood blister-  
Imagine a different sky with stars.

Through the window, your face reflected,  
the rising moon bruising the last clouds,

there are no stars and the owl you long to see  
trawling the hedgerows is missing,

his night-eyes elsewhere, hoping  
for an element of surprise as light fades  
on fields, their ancient names forgotten.

It is nearly Halloween; old ghosts accompany  
the closing of the light.

Somewhere an owl complains bitterly.

We must all survive what we have been given.  
A hunter crouches low behind the hedge;

the swollen moon leaks a gash of sudden pain.

## November

### *Frost Moon*

In one day - three seasons early in the month.  
Same sky as spring - that left-over sunlight on

the oak tree - all that remains of late summer.  
Early mornings, there is a glistening frost

and slanting sun, a depth of blue as if the earth  
is undecided. At night the moon remembers

itself - it is not the sun, under whom men hunt,  
but a small relation, marking time on the year.

## December

### *Cold Moon*

A cold moon, named for its brightness, hangs in a frame of sky.  
Somewhere an owl stirs, restless with knowledge that tonight

is the best chance for hunting; ravenous hungers that make him fly  
too low and close, take risks with each passing dazzling light,

skim the wet road as if the field he has in his memory;  
the history of him, the food trips his mother made, his first flight

shakily landing, wrong-footed, righting himself in the dark tree.

Driving home, poetry in my head, I did not dream him there  
until too late; he swept from the blackness, wings splayed wide

into the space of a moment we both shared. Too late to alter  
course or swerve away. When we least expect it our worlds collide

and sometimes we survive unscarred. To think of him lucky and alive  
would be one way of coping with the truth. This poem is another.

Like ghostly confetti he is floating away, feather by feather.

## 4. An Indifferent Camera

*There are in our existence spots of time  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed  
By trivial occupations and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds-  
Especially the imaginative power-  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;*

William Wordsworth (Prelude 1799, I, 288-94)

## Barn Owl

You would imagine him, night flying,  
silently ghosting  
over country roads, bridged with trees,  
teasing a lonely path between myths  
chilled by superstition.

*This* was different...

Our breath held captive  
to the winter afternoon,  
the glow of the nearest town an hour away,  
no moon or stars to  
punctuate the sullen sky.

Solemn as only an owl can be in daylight,  
yellow against the briefest dust of snow,  
he quartered the field,  
skimming close to earth,  
squat-bodied and broad winged.

Pale feathered moth in weightless flight,  
determined to outwit the frozen night.

## **On an owl, electrocuted by a high wire**

Breaching the hill, up among the summer-laden trees,  
we came across a young owl, freshly hung, suspended

face first; a small trapeze artist holding the secret  
of flight, talons clasping the treacherous wire

that betrayed him; now a caricature of tawny feathers,  
grotesque but intact, untouched by crow or magpie,

undisturbed by bluebottle or wasp. So high and unlikely  
the shock that stopped his heart, scorched his breath,

had welded blood to bone, made sinews taut with fire,  
blown his eyes open to the possibility of forever.

Not the horror of the circus performer, poised to fall...  
yet caught gracefully, a tiny jewelled figure spiralling

to earth, safely landing before our upturned faces,  
the collective gasp, breath released through spaced fingers.

This was something else; for days the body darkened,  
unravelling from within, washed by indifferent weather.

An upside- down half-open umbrella of slack feathers,  
he hung, bat-like, the spokes of his wings exposed

to public view. Each new day followed each owl dusk.  
An invisible stain of decay in the clotted air, while

dust motes danced in the sunlight, a slow meltdown  
before the final unrehearsed free-fall into the hedgerow.



## Maybugs

*Melolontha Vulgaris*

A blunder down shady lanes, drawn by the early evening light  
in windows; their awkward flight a pilgrimage that sends

them spinning into glass, is when we notice them, and then,  
up-ended in the porch, like sea-creatures, beached, quiet.

If you hold one in a cave of hands, it will still, remembering  
the dark cell it crawled from, deep in a catacomb of earth.

Feathered antennae stroke skin, sense moonlight beyond fingers.  
Primeval urges set it whirring. A clockwork automaton

with an armour-plated shell, and a fierce appetite for trees.  
Each year, we forget their brief collision with our lives,

their other secret selves – the blind grubs shuffling the soil,  
mining tree roots, ready to move as one towards the sky.

## **An Indifferent Camera**

Although the pheasant cannot name his pain,  
we recognise something human in his face.  
Bereft, he paces the roadside verge for days,

under the indifferent eye of the camera  
placed to catch those who drive too carelessly  
or fast. One blink - she was gone from his side.

This new arrangement of feathers bewilders him.  
Her dull un-seeing eye and twisted form framed  
by hedge parsley, primroses, lush May growth.

You sat by yourself, grieving like this for years.  
Stared past the window, beyond her favourite chair  
no-one cared to sit in, or dare disturb your memories

by mentioning you were often talking to yourself  
or her photograph, feathered with dust and silence.  
The worst of it really, was the curse of being alone.

The flowering ache of loss slowly hardening to stone.

## Afterwards

*Tsunami, Boxing Day 2004*

They marvelled at the old blind animal keeper  
who faintly heard the first damp shouts and cries,

wilder than the strings of sea-birds flying inland  
over his head in a crooked pencil-line to safety.

Whose elephants sixth-sensed even him and on  
majestic tomb-stone feet moved ponderously

uphill, to where he sat amongst them, shivering.  
Later, when he could speak, he described the bees,

as from the swamps and undergrowth they came.  
Searching, stroking still faces with vibrant wings,

singing comfort songs, blessings and whisperings.

## Opening the sky

We think of the house now,  
in terms of *before* and *after*.

The roof challenged by the light-space,  
where the rafters should be.

Not by what we see,  
but those things we do not miss.

This morning, the silent passage of geese,  
seen from below, divide the sky.

The house lit by daffodils,  
defies an overnight snowfall

still leaning on the glass above,  
a late guest. It is hard to remember

how it was before we opened the sky to view;  
a new perspective filters  
light and half-light so fleetingly.

Last night, the new moon poised on the frame,  
reflected on your plate like a ripe cheese.

## Renewal

Someone has discovered  
that flowers will grow on the moon.  
A particular type of marigold  
thrives on grey stony ground,

endures extreme cold  
and opens its delicate petals  
only at midnight.

While we sleep, eyes open  
onto the earth like a watchful mother;  
hopeful faces turn towards  
a faint murmur of moth-breath,

lifting the possibility of renewal  
from distant dust-covered wings.

## Magdalenes

What became of their lives, the girls whose secrets were stolen?  
Made to scrub their sins away in the dark basement of history  
until raw hands bled into the laundry and their tears ran dry.

This wire basket, found in the old convent, is their memorial.  
A witness to their pain, dipping in and out of shadows cast  
on the whitewashed gallery wall by a late summer sun

that picks out each fine embroidered letter of their names;  
*Kathleen, Mary, Brigid*, white on white, pure as driven snow  
against the dates that fixed them there, from the register

a hundred years ago. No crime recorded but the shame of love,  
when like trapped birds, their wings were clipped and broken.  
They would never have imagined how to fly differently.

We stare, affronted, find comfort in this rosary of names;  
white feathers tied artfully so they would be remembered  
one by one, lifted from those long shadows into the sun.

## Outside an un-named café in Munich

*1911*

It is beginning to rain; fine insistent drizzle steals light  
from pavements as the day disappears, folds the afternoon

away as crisply as the tablecloths, starched and bleached,  
resist crumbs of damp from raincoat and umbrella.

Inside, the gas lamps fizz, surprise into a faded yellow gloom  
that lifts the mood. Somewhere, faintly, someone sings.

Two men, at different tables, years apart, are missing home.  
Each hopes the tea is English, simple and will reach the heart

of what they long for. Both use a notebook, leather-bound  
and write in ink, but neither knows the other, or will meet.

What links them in this space of time, is words; underneath  
those words, foreboding or a sense that time is all.

One man carefully measures out his life in coffee-spoons;  
the other is contemplating honey, and dreaming of bees.

*There is rumoured to exist a photograph of the poets Rupert Brooke and T.S.Eliot,  
taking tea in a café in Munich, 1911.*

## Brighton Museum

*'A fine exhibit of Midwinter stoneware - Sun design circa 1973' (label)*

Amazed that history had caught up with us so soon,  
visiting the newly refurbished Museum, we stared,

*Remember when...* even through the distancing of glass.  
The tea-pot brought you suddenly into view.

This was your gift, our wedding present.  
The fortune-teller in you chose carefully and well.

Its yellow optimism shone through your misgivings;  
warming our hopes for a sunnier life than yours.

When happiness got too close, you buried it,  
*Always a stack of dishes in the sink.* A cup of tea,

and then the second chance to dream the future.  
Years later, at your bedside, you offered *tea*.

Not for you, but me, for comfort when you had gone,  
as if that alone would make the difference.



## Van Gogh's 'Moonrise'

What we know now is precisely where he stood, the painter,  
his vision angled to capture the scene. Not seated at an easel,  
straw hat half shielding his face, but at a distant high window.

Our perceptions have changed. 'Sunset' becomes 'Moonrise.'  
Eyes adjust to the early evening light, focus on the eastern sky.  
As if we have always known it, we reclaim long-lost shadows.

Dusk begins to bloom in corners, taking edges off the field  
where fat sheaves stand expectantly, violet, ochre, gold.  
The stars tell us, as they have always told us; now we know

exactly when the painter saw the cornfield, how long his eye held  
the view as light faded. The full moon taking her time, a too-heavy  
woman climbing the sky, face flushed with the heat of summer.

## The Lost Gardens of Heligan

Seventy summers passed - lost to sight - these gardens slept untended  
while brambles, dog-rose, thorny weed covered all traces of the men

whose shears hung silent on the hooks, as if called suddenly for tea.  
Their faces in the photograph fear nothing; not the apocalypse of war

that may not reach as far as Cornwall; they have weathered worse  
storms off the sea, blown sideways like thistledown in bullets of hail.

Not death itself; they know finality - their hands, their father's hands  
before them, smell of the rich saltiness of earth, beginnings and ends.

Instead, their faces speak of this year and the next - regeneration.  
When sixteen of the twenty-two did not return, the gardens mourned

under a carapace of fallen trees and leaves, broken glass and rust.  
The earth churned, struggled to breathe; as nature renewed itself.

In the ancient glasshouse now restored, a giant peach tree in flower  
has reinvented itself - blossom, leaves and fruit in equal measure.

## Foundling Museum, Coram Fields

*'Go, gentle babe...And all thy life be happiness and love' – note left by mother\**

This long catalogue of names - clues to who they might have been.  
*Prudence Friendly, Isaac Bliss* or *Sweet Rose* - betray a human face.

Others, sourced where their narrative began, perhaps more fondly  
 after a place on a map, *Thomas Africa, Isabella Southampton*, may

have journeyed far. For *Mary Wormwood*, little doubt who sent her.  
 Un-christened, a *'female child'* whispers her beginning was her end.

But here is something tangible we can feel - when history reaches  
 out and touches us. The broken halves of unshared lives lie here

in simple tokens; a button, walnut-shell, the owner's voice unheard.  
 Somewhere, safe inside - *Remember me* - the unspoken word.

*\*Between 1741 and 1760, 5,000 tokens were left by mothers with their children at the Foundling Hospital. London. These were never shared with the children, but were kept for identification in case the mother and child were reunited.*

## Last Word

In Africa, one word for *now*,  
Another for *tomorrow*,  
But forty words for the *past*.

The elephants do not forget.  
They stand close in a circle,  
Turn the heaped pile of bones

This way and that, stroke  
Leg-bone, thigh and skull,  
Rub dust into their faces.

Sighing, they understand  
The weight of grief,  
How memory is carried.

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## Appendix

### Telling the Bees – a revision process

This is the title poem of the Anthology of poems, and has undergone several revisions since 2008, when the inspiration for the poem arose. I knew that I wanted to write this poem and that it would be the title I would use, with its perfect analogy of ‘telling’, sharing personal memories. It has been a difficult poem to complete, for several reasons and has undergone several transformations between then and now. I have placed great emphasis on *language choices* in this poem, concentrating on each word choice to balance the subject matter. Unusually, I began with the final image, of placing black cloth over the hive to calm the bees, and worked backwards into the narration. I imagined the central character to be a young woman, in 1916-18, wearing an apron, looking out of a window in a cottage. She will receive the ‘bad news’ that unfolds slowly through the imagery of countryside superstition and folk-lore. The poem resembles a story, in its three parts; **setting the scene**, ‘News travelled more slowly then;’ **a central action**, as in a play opening with a character; ‘She said’ using a third-person narrative, which then pivots on a single line, ‘imagined the plumb-line to loss, the weight of his absence, long before language named it.’ This leads into the **final conclusion** of the poem; ‘the way the sun exploded out of nowhere and her mouth *stayed open to catch it*’...and **closure**, ‘*Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night*’.

The final version has a visual pattern on the page, but not a formal metrical pattern. Two lines, followed by a single line, three lines followed by a single line, then two lines before the final single line. The lines are long, between twelve and sixteen syllables, which mimics the conversational tone. The stress is usually on the fourth beat.

News travelled more slowly then, had its own momentum  
A gathering storm, as it passed over cities, towns, villages.

There is a speech-pattern, accentuated by ‘She said,’ based on everyday language.

The poem contains several different rhymes, particularly internal rhymes;

‘friends/endings’, ‘then/ momentum’ and near rhymes, ‘storm/warned’, ‘dead/feathers’, ‘mouth/shroud’ I have also identified vowel rhymes following consideration that my accent may also affect the reading of my poems; ‘gathering/glancing’ for example.

I have included several drafts of 'Telling the Bees,' which demonstrate how a poet considers all aspects of 'making' a poem, to make it work, including experimentation with different form. Recently, I have explored a range of possibilities for my poems, but generally revert to a familiar style which suits my voice.

**Telling the Bees or/ Message (v1– based on notes)**

It was different then; news crawled across distances  
we would reach in hours. Knowledge filtered slowly

through towns and villages, up country lanes thinning  
to ribboned paths and woods; a garden gate swinging

where she would lean sometimes to meet the world.  
A door left open on this afternoon - a knock - and then

she knew for certain; brown paper, his name, *regrets, missing*.  
The way the sun exploded out of nowhere and her mouth

Stayed open to catch it, stayed open to swallow the words  
that were left unsaid. Words she would gently tell the bees

**smooth** **whisper to the bees**  
To settle their grief and calm their angry voices ( *He is dead.*)

**Telling the bees was easy; the simplest part  
After the storm of news that broke her heart**

Later, she would find black cloth, along with words to shroud  
... the hives, to settle the bees and stop their angry voices.

### **Telling the Bees (v.2)**

It was different then;  
news crawled across distances  
we would reach in hours.

Knowledge filtered slowly  
through towns and villages,  
up country lanes thinning  
to ribboned paths and woods;  
a garden-gate swinging-

where she would lean sometimes  
to meet the world.  
A door left open on this  
afternoon - a knock -  
and then she knew for certain;  
brown paper – his name

*regrets – missing.*

The way the sun exploded  
out of nowhere  
and her mouth stayed open  
to catch it,  
stayed open to swallow the words  
that were left unsaid.

Words she would whisper later  
to the bees  
to muffle their grief  
and smooth their angry voices.

Black cloth to shroud the hives,  
  
bring down the night.

### **Telling the bees (v.3)**

News travelled slowly then; had its own momentum,  
a gathering storm hovering over cities, towns, villages,

just as a single horseman might once have warned of danger,  
glancing over his shoulder, the growing urgency behind him

a disturbance in the air, **unsettling superstitions, a hornet's nest.**

She said she sensed something wrong when the clock stopped.  
Before that the dead pigeon on the roof was a clue, its feathers

stuck fast to the window-glass, each gust of wind finding more.  
She began to look for signs herself, a heron blown off course,

the screech owl nearby. She greeted magpies like old friends  
saw endings not beginnings, imagined how loss might feel –

**rehearsed opening the door to a stranger,  
long before the telegram spat out its message...*regrets...missing.***

What surprised her was the way the sun exploded from nowhere  
and her mouth stayed open to catch it, stayed open to swallow

the words that were left unsaid, those she would later whisper  
to the bees, to muffle their grief and smooth their angry voices.

Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night.

**Telling the Bees (Final version)**

News travelled more slowly then; had its own momentum,  
a gathering storm as it passed through cities, towns, villages,

just as a single horseman might once have warned of danger,  
glancing over his shoulder, a growing urgency behind him,

a disturbance in the air, a brooding cloud of unease, a swarm.

She said she sensed something wrong when the clock stopped.  
Before that the dead pigeon on the roof was a clue, its feathers

sticking to the window-glass, each gust of wind finding more.  
She began to look for signs herself, a heron blown off course,

the screech owl nearby. She greeted magpies like old friends,  
saw endings not beginnings, imagined the plumb-line to loss,

the weight of his absence, long before language named it.

What surprised her was the way the sun exploded from nowhere  
and her mouth stayed open to catch it, stayed open to swallow

the words that were left unsaid; those she would later whisper  
to the bees, to muffle their grief and smooth their angry voices.

Black cloth to shroud the troubled hive, bring down the night.